THE NEXT BIG IDEA

what's app and what's crap?

You will learn:

- Why apps matter to your firm
- Things to consider when building an app
- What makes a good app

What's App and What's Crap?

By Gayatri Bhalla

"There's an app for that"-really?

Marketers everywhere have become app happy as they work to make their offerings more and more accessible and valuable in an increasingly mobile world. For many, apps make a lot of sense. But will they be worth the time and expense for your firm? Maybe. Before you invest, here's a quick primer and an important list of questions to consider.

Why apps matter

Mobile usage is growing so fast that by 2013, more users will access the Internet from a mobile device than from a desktop (don't just take my word for it—take Mary Meeker's from Morgan Stanley). It's obvious that Internet access to email and such is important to mobile users, but the new functionality of mobile devices has become so popular and pervasive that they are replacing other tools in our lives at an astonishing rate. This new functionality is driven by apps. There are apps for waking you up, guiding your workout regimen, timing your subway route, scheduling your travel, making reservations, ... and on and on. Apps are a $2 billion market today and going nowhere but up.

What's an app?

An app is short for software application. On a mobile device (like the iPhone, iPad, Blackberry or Android) apps are downloaded from iTunes or other app websites and live on the main screen of your device. iTunes is an app. So is Public Radio Tuner, Salesforce.com, FedEx Mobile and Plants vs. Zombies (to each their own). Some apps enable you to interact without a wireless connection—for example, logging data for timesheets or playing a game like Solitare—but others require an Internet connection to look up information (like tracking your shipped package). Many apps are just Internet bookmarks with an icon on your phone's homepage. They either link to a standard webpage or a mobile version of that webpage. True apps are standalone entities that offer functionality unique to the device.

Building an app

Apple has created a gated community around apps for their devices. To get into the club, which is iTunes, the app must meet stringent usability guidelines as documented by Apple here. Other device platforms are

more open, including RIM's Blackberry, Nokia's Symbian and Google's Android, but don't offer the broad adoption of Apple's i-suite devices. Deciding which platform to build an app for is a core decision, and there is little overlap in development process between the platforms. Take into account who will use the app and which devices they use in order to determine the devices and platforms you need to support.

But it's not just a platform issue—each device offers a different way of interacting with it. iPhones use a touch screen only. Blackberries have a combination of touchscreen and trackpad/rollerball. Androids and Nokia's are different still. How the user can physically interact with an app will drive how it's organized and what it can do. Usability looms large in the app world, and usability for mobile differs vastly from usability for websites.

And all of these devices offer different screen sizes-what you can show on a 2.5″ x 2″ Blackberry screen is totally different than what can be shown on a 9.56″ x 7.47″ iPad screen. Screen size will determine the layout of the app and how deep the navigation can go (smaller screen sizes necessitate separate views for content).

What's a good app?
In some ways the answer comes down to one's point of view, like Justice Stewart's statement, "I know it when I see it." In other ways, good apps are a matter of utility. They earn an audience and use because they offer new or more convenient functionality. As you consider both form and function of a possible new app, here are some fundamental guidelines to help you determine what's app and what's crap:

1) *Is it useful?* This seems pretty basic, doesn't it? But all too often, in the rush to be first with the next big thing, this important step is missed. The app needs to provide information or solve a problem that is relevant to the user. An app that is just a listing of your blog posts doesn't make the cut.

2) *Is it just a mobile version of your website?* If it is, stop right there. The user can just as easily browse to your site via his/her mobile browser. If the content is no different, then why would someone bother to download the app? Better to put the effort into creating a version of your site that is optimized for mobile viewing.

3) *Is it intuitive to use?* Mobile screens offer next to no room for lengthy explanations. If your app doesn't make sense from the first glance, it will be abandoned.

4) *Can you interact with it with a few taps?* Lengthy keyboard entry won't work in this space. Navigation via a few taps is the key.

5) *How are you going to maintain it?* The information on the app needs to refreshed constantly—it cannot languish. A calendar for updating and adding content is required.

Think about the standard this way: Is your firm's app icon worth space on a user's mobile desktop? Is it unique enough? Does it offer a compelling experience? Does it take advantage of the mobile interface? Is it worth a user's time?

If the answer to any of these questions is "Yes", let us help develop your firm's app. If the answer is "No", then you need to go back to the drawing board, and you can save that app development fund for another use—like re-doing your website.

digitalrecipe #4
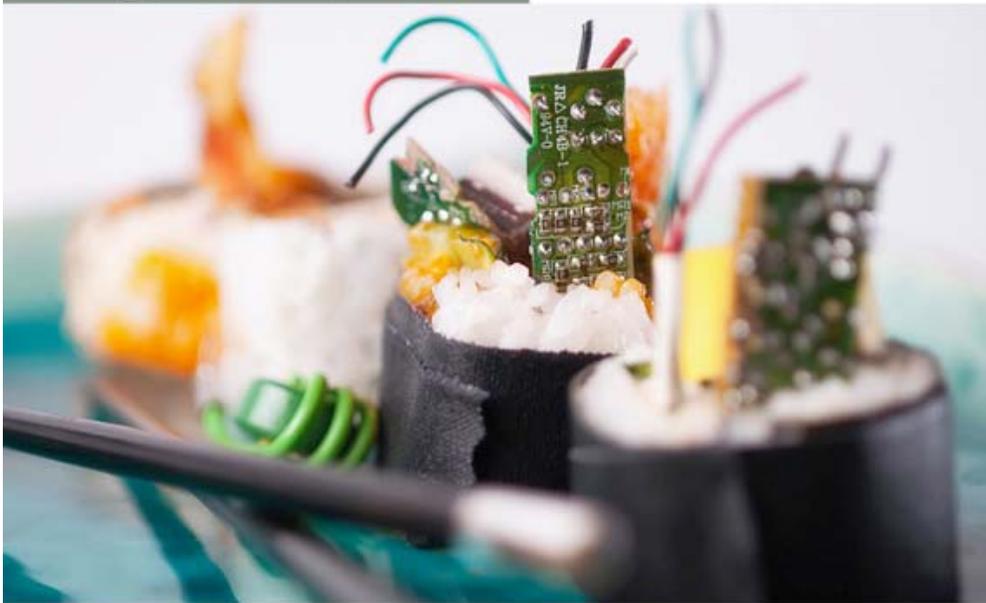
Reduce Cost Per Lead

When budget cuts hit and you feel overwhelmed, start with the math: Reduce your cost per lead.

1. Measure the value of opportunities created by each channel. Identify all your channels. Say there are 10—whitepaper, annual review, Big Idea, email, webinar, then give each one a value of 10%. Ask leads what promotional channels they noticed.

2. Calculate each channel's cost.

3. Dial back on high-cost activities (e.g. swap large trade shows for smaller shows, or change objectives for each show).

4. Expand use of low-cost activities.

5. Increase use of virtual thought-leadership events.

6. Try new stuff; e.g. online film series, host videos on a microsite promoted through email, social and PR.

7. Have us help.

Read all of chef Gayatri Bhalla's recipes on our Digital Cooking blog!