We need an App !

A SEMI SERIOUS GUIDE

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Are you sure you need an App?

Answer this question first. Try to be honest with yourself. Are you sure you need an App? Having an App published at an App store does not equal a mobile strategy or a strategy at all. I promise more on this in the next chapters.

Avoid the iphonification of your senior management. The iPhone launches and becomes the high-end device to have in your hands. Its popularity spreads fast among senior management. They fall hard or this sexy new device. It's usable, easy, and it's simple to find and install new Apps. Everyone seems to have an App!

Suddenly, senior management reaches you and says, "We need an app! ASAP!" Don't jump too fast! That's probably the biggest mistake you can make. Nobody says your company doesn't deserve to have an App in the App store. You probably should have one. But you should look very carefully at your App's function and purpose. That will drive development and help you market it properly. Isn't that how you approach any product your company produces and markets? As with any product, begin with a goal. Do your research. What kinds of Apps have your competitors offered? Download their Apps and use them awhile. Check user ratings and comments. These may be the most useful data you can gather about what your clients or users will expect from the App.

Ok, you've answered the question. Your competitors have Apps. Your market demands an App. And an App may increase your web traffic, your sales, or some other number that directly affects your bottom line. You're convinced you need an App.

Make a research chart. You're going to spend more time doing research than you might imagine. Use a spreadsheet or database program you like: Excel, Numbers, PowerPoint, Keynote, or Google Docs.

Begin by gathering all the information available on similar Apps:

1. Make a list of each functionality your competitors' Apps have. This will be your Functionalities row.

2. In the second row, note the process or system in your own company that's impacted by each function, your Company Impact row.

3. Make a Complexity row. Rate the complexity of changing each of those company systems. Would it be easy, challenging, or difficult to make changes in that system in your company?

4. Rate each feature's importance in an Importance row: not important, important, or vital.

5. Go through all the comments and ratings that clients have given to existing Apps and list those comments in your Comments row.

6. Go through the reviews and comments again. This time note all those features that users have requested from your competitor's Apps. This is your Requests row.

FUNCTIONALITIES	Functionality 1	Functionality 2	Functionality 3
COMPANY IMPACT	acme process	generic department	random system
COMPLEXITY	challenging	difficult	easy
IMPORTANCE	vital	not important	important
COMMENTS	"example comment" "example comment" "example comment"	"example comment" "example comment" "example comment"	"example comment" "example comment" "example comment"
REQUESTS	50 requests	500 requests	5 requests

At the end of this exercise you should have a clear map of what's out there, how clients comment on App features, and the impact on your organization's processes and systems. Your research chart makes a great starting point, and it may answer the question, "Do I really need an App?"

Don't be tempted to build a useless App!

2

Mobile is not Desktop.

Maybe your company already maintains an important web presence, delivering your client a great service and a fantastic user experience. That is a desktop web presence. Mobile is not desktop! On mobile platforms, you have much less real estate to use compared to the average desktop out there.

Also, you have also a very different interaction model with a mobile device: no mouse or keyboard on the majority of the smart phones on the market today.

When you design for mobile, you play an entirely different game. Your mobile App should not be a carbon copy of your fixed website. They serve totally different purposes in the customer journey.

Your mobile and desktop presence each provides a different touch point in the customer journey. This journey may include print, in-store experience, fixed web site, mobile web site, social networking sites, and any other marketing tactics you use.

The customer journey has expanded in the past five years. Your client may approach your company, products, or service from many more different touch points, so you need a plan that gently guides your customer from one touch point to another without pain. This is why you need a mobile strategy as well as a strategy for any of your touch points.

Look into your organization. You may happen to already have visual designers and interaction designers on your staff. These designers probably have talent and a ton of experience in web design and development. The same thing may be true for technology. A bunch of front-end and back-end developers may already work on your web site. Don't even think of putting these professionals on your mobile App team. There are so many differences between the two worlds that your existing staff will doom you to fail, and if not failure, then pain.

Let your web designers and developers do their jobs, and find

someone who can master this job!

3

Get to know your users.

You may find a complete list of features if you have done your research properly and you have dedicated enough time to it. It may still not be enough, though. It's time to do more research, in the field and in your company. Many research methodologies exist. Google something like "design research." Pick a methodology, and start studying.
Research in two different streams:

Field Research: Reach out to real users.
In-house Research: Reach out to your stakeholders.

The more data you collect during this phase, the more data you will be able to analyze to design and deliver a great mobile App. If your company already employs a social media strategy, leverage that to collect more data from your potential users. Facebook and Twitter can be great tools for this kind of stuff. For example, a Facebook page can engage your users to offer feedback and solutions before you launch a mobile App. This research will inform other segments of the process and augment your features chart.

Real users are much more important than stakeholders!

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Subtract. Don't Add.

Now you've got a big list of potential features. Beware of trying to cram them all into one little mobile App. Instead, think about one hundred features, design for the best ten features, and launch the App with the three best features.

So identify the three core features of your Apps from your chart.

I am not necessarily saying that must limit your mobile App to only three features, though I do think most Apps would benefit from reducing their number of features. Later, you may offer additional features for the user to activate. Hide those for now, and focus on the core three.

Remember, just three!

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Answer a Specific Question.

Return to the original question: Do you really need an App? Let's look at it another way: Does your App really do something? Make sure you can answer yes to both of these questions because your App must provide real value to your users.

Start by answering a specific question:

Where's your closest store?
What's the price of that sweater?
Who has written about that movie?

This is a simple way to provide value to your users. Answer your user questions and relieve your customer care department from extra work.

Offer an answer!

6

Study the Thirty-second User Experience.

Your App will live on a mobile phone, and the user will engage with it while he's on the go. How do you use most of your mobile phone Apps right now? Spend a couple of days taking notes on your interactions with your mobile phone. Create another simple research table to track your own use. Note the Apps you use, the time or date of use, which features you

use, and how much time you spend. Your new table might look something like this:

DATE	APP	FEATURE	TIME
6/13	Calendar	Look up events	30 seconds
6/13	Calendar	Add new event	60 seconds
6/13	Facebook	Upload photo	60 seconds
6/13	Twitter	Update status	30 seconds

After a few days, a pattern should emerge, and you will discover that most of the time you use a mobile App for a minute or less. That's important, and it's typical of any mobile user out there. You take your phone from your pocket, launch an App, perform one or two quick tasks, and then place the phone back in your pocket.

There are clearly exceptions to this, such as playing games, browsing, and reading news. Your data will help you identify the types of Apps you use for longer than a minute as well. But focus on those first thirty seconds. How do you provide the best user experience in the first thirty seconds?

Consider these two scenarios:

when the user launches the aApp for the very first time.
when the user uses your App after the first time.

When the user launches the App for the very first time, first impressions begin to form. It's very difficult to change a user's opinion about your App after those first thirty seconds. Think very carefully about what you want from that short period of time. You have to impress your user and make him think he has just downloaded the best App out there. Showing 50 pages of unintelligible legal-ese is not a great idea. If you have to include that stuff for any reason, just place it deeper in your App.

What will you do in your next thirty seconds?

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Prepare for technology limitations.

Are you developing for a certain platform? What are its limitations? You have to plan for that. Imagine a mobile App that allows a user to compare prices on goods by reading a barcode. You noticed that 90% of your users have iPhones, so you're developing for that platform. The iPhone has a camera, so you assume users will be able to capture barcodes from it.

Wrong assumption.

The iPhone 3g does not support autofocus, so you will deliver a poor user experience to any users carrying the 3g, leading to negative reviews of your Apps. If you get bad reviews, nobody will use your App.

This gets even more challenging if you target a range of platforms like Android, Windows Phone 7, and Symbian (Yes, I said that!) On these platforms, the hardware and software mix may vary a lot from vendor to vendor. Be aware of platform limitations when you plan for your mobile App features.

Ready for another table? List the target platforms you will address and map what the features each platform supports. Also map the penetration in the market of each platform you target. That will help to size your potential customer base. This data will be even more useful when you adapt your systems and processes.

TARGET PLATFORM	Android	Windows Phone 7
SUPPORTED FEATURES	sample feature a sample feature b sample feature c ...	sample feature a sample feature b sample feature c ...
MARKET PENETRATION	5 million sold	5.2 million sold

Get to know your devices, or at least find someone who knows!

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Gather the best mobile App team.

It is very unlikely that you have all the resources you need to publish a mobile App in your organization. Do not be tempted to use your desktop design and development staff for mobile design and development. The mobile App market has produced new companies and developers with mobile strategies and designers and developers who've mastered the art of mobile, especially visual design, information architecture, interaction design, development, quality assurance, testing, and deployment. Do your research. Read client comments. Review your developers' experience and approach to each of the phases of building an App.

Yes, you've got to develop mobile Apps with just as much care as any other type of software.

Small does not translate to easy!

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Don't push (too much).

Every App you install on your mobile phone today offers the option to push notifications to your mobile phone while you are on the go. You may want to add push notifications to your feature list. That may be a good idea, but seriously consider it.
Does the push notification add substantial value for your user?
Push only information that's useful to your clients. Push notifications already cluttered their screens. Let the user opt in and, if they do, provide them a simple way to deactivate this feature.

Don't (always) push.

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Limit social networks interactions.

Every single App I have seen recently offers options to connect to almost every social network like Facebook and Twitter. That's an interesting feature to offer, and it can result in additional visibility via your inner circle of clients. But your clients may dislike the maelstrom of status updates and "likes" your App automates. Plan for this feature in your App, but limit it to those areas where it is really relevant. And always get the user's permission to publish something on social networks. Publishing something on Facebook or Twitter without asking the user for confirmation is the worst thing you could do.

Let your clients decide how they want to be social!

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Beware of App Store rules.

Before you send your app feature list to the developers to start coding and production, look at the rules of your target app store. The features you're planning may not qualify under the agreement you have signed. Look at the developer agreement, and build a list of limitations.

As of today, the Apple App Store exerts the greatest feature limitations, such as:
Apps that are primarily marketing materials or advertisement will be rejected.
Audio streaming content over a cellular network may not use more than 5MB over 5 minutes.
Apps that look similar to apps bundled on the iPhone, including the App Store, iTunes Store, and iBookstore will be rejected.
Content subscriptions using IAP (In App Purchase) must last a minimum of 7 days and be available to the user from all their iOS devices.

Some of these restrictions can have critical effects on your plan. Consider the last example regarding subscriptions. If your app features hinge on daily subscriptions to your clients, you'll have to go back to the drawing board—at least in the Apple department.
Even as a mobile telecommunication operator, I struggled to overcome these restrictions and learned that app stores make no exceptions.

So don't toy with app store rules – you're playing with fire!

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Follow your own rules.

Also consider your own organization rules, processes, and procedures. You internal rules and limitations could prevent your App from hitting the App store or delay your time to market. For example:

If you plan to display data and information from your company, be sure that you are allowed to do that and that the right people are involved and informed. You'll probably need to connect from an external App, and so many things can go wrong security-wise. Let's say I am a mobile telecom operator, and I am willing to deliver to my users an App that will allow them to monitor the usage of their mobile phone, a simple App that will show their spending and data usage.

That sounds easy. You already have that data in your systems, so you simply need to expose it to your users through the mobile App.

It sounds easy, but it isn't. Probably your systems are designed to sustain a certain amount of concurrent users, probably via a fixed web user interface. Consider the additional user load coming from your App. Are your systems ready to support that additional user load?

Don't break the rules!

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Design with care.

Anyone can see that the launch of the iPhone has changed the rules of the game for every player in this industry, end users included. Being a high-end device and a status symbol, it has landed in senior management hands in every company, and I think that's had a very interesting side effect. If you work in an innovation company or a department dealing with interaction design, you already know how difficult it is to show your senior manager your work is critical to the success of your product or service.

Once, those sitting around the big mahogany table in the conference room didn't know anything about usability and user experience, but the iPhone has paved the way for a better appreciation for usability among senior management and all end users. So design your App with care, making design the centerpiece of your initiative. Interaction design and information architecture are just the beginning. Smartphones have big, bright screens, so visual design becomes equally important. Visual design dictates how the client will perceive your product, service, and company. It's another critical element for the success of your App.

May the artists be with you!

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Your App has a life.

Once your App has been published at the target App store, your work has just started. Look at daily, weekly, and monthly download statistics, hopefully enjoying some success. But a critical piece of information—the life of your App on your client's mobile phone–still eludes you. How often does your client use it? How many clients have deleted it?

If your App interacts with your backend infrastructure, you'll get some feedback, but you can also solve this dilemma by publishing updates often, making new features available to the end users. Angry Birds and Pocket God on the iPhone succeeded with this approach. Users download a new version of the game they love every few months, updating their experience and assuring the company of continued use.

This mechanism can keep your App at the top of the user's mind, make users more willing to use it again, or at least entice them to check out what's new. Use a storyboard to plan future releases of features and when you'll implement and market them. Keep in mind your user's educational process. Let users get acquainted with the basic structure of your App first. Give them time to understand and learn new functionalities as soon as you make them available.

Keep communication channels open so you get more feedback through App reviews, social media, and direct communication.

Let your baby grow over time.

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You cannot throttle downloads.

Your App has finally hit the App store. If you have publicized the launch, users will start downloading your App and using it. An important fact at this stage: you cannot throttle downloads. Every customer who wants to download your App will try.
If your App interacts with your company system you may expect a peak in traffic. The first users will start downloading your App, and maybe tweet about it or post something on Facebook, causing others to download and try it. More traffic hits your systems. Usually this peak decreases a few days after the launch, when the traffic quantity balances with the system capacity you planned, but there's not much you can do to prevent the traffic jam in the meantime. You could add more capacity for the first few days, but that's not always a viable option.
Instead, be ready to communicate to your user what's happening and reassure them you are addressing the issue. This stage leaves you vulnerable to two major risks:

traffic may bring down your information systems
users may post negative ratings or reviews in the App store

Get ready for hasty statements like, "It doesn't work!" and "This really sucks." Users who've have paid or are paying to use your App will respond even more rudely and aggressively, so offer rewards for those early customers.

Be ready for launch!

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Really listen.

The first days have passed, and hopefully your App's achieving the results you expected. I am sorry to say you still have work to do. Carefully monitor what happens out there.
First, monitor the rating and comments on your App.
Also monitor the social network space, blogs, and forums to gather relevant feedback on your App. Analyze data and act accordingly. Release new versions of the App, implement user requests, and make your App grow over time.

Really, really listen!

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Haters gonna hate.

This is an easy one.
Whatever you do for your users, haters gonna hate.

Forget and move on.

About the Author

I am the General Manager of the Milan studio of frog (http://www.frogdesign.com). frog drives innovation in the connected world. I love working for frog. I have always sought innovation in my mobile and wireless career, and I think frog does a great job helping companies driving their innovation efforts.

Before frog, as Head Of Product Development at H3G Italy, best known as 3, the first European mobile telco operator to launch a UMTS commercial service, I delivered innovative products and services to the market. Back in 2006 we won the GSMA award in the Best Mobile Music Service category with the 3Player java App. My team designed and delivered a range of customized handsets for 3. Our most impressive model, the 3 Web Cube, also works as a UMTS/WiFi router.

I've made many mistakes, and I list them in this book so you can learn from my stumbles.

"... my advice has no basis more reliable than my own meandering experience."
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Everybody's free (to wear sunscreen)
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We Need an App!

Are you sure you need an App? Before you jump on the App bandwagon, read these clever guidelines for senior managers preparing to build Apps. Author Alessandro Galetto built his career developing exciting mobile Apps and shares that experience with you in these practical guidelines.

A swift read but packed with helpful tips, We Need an App! asks tough questions with chapters like, "Are You Sure You Need An App?" and provides insightful solutions like, "Really Listen."

We Need An App! will help you:

\# save time.

\# avoid mistakes.

\# focus on what's important.

Nobody's got the recipe for a perfect mobile App, but this simple list will help you address your needs—and your customer's desires—when you design one.