

COLUMNS

## Why apps will reign in the era of content

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By [Michael Colombo](#)



The old tired Internet Age adage, “Content is King,” sounds about as relevant as Netscape to the browser wars these days.

We live in a new era with the Internet Age giving way to its heir apparent, the Age of Apps.

Today, content is only one element in a user experience and is one that typically extends far beyond the printed page, the television screen, and even the Web browser.

The Content is King cliché holds as a core premise that there are a limited number of content distribution channels, and so usage is directly related to the value of the content being distributed.

While Web 2.0 delivered an excess of new tools and resources for creating and distributing content online, there was really only one new distribution channel to consider – the browser.

Duking it out

As the gateway to the connected experience, browsers became the theatres of war for companies trying to control this beachhead of online content consumption.

The first was a bloody skirmish between Internet Explorer (IE) and Netscape that left the latter a bag of open-source bones picked over by Mozilla.

However, by the time an all-but-abandoned IE 6 was trying to fend off Chromezilla, the war had become more of a cordial disagreement than an armed conflict.

So, while Time magazine was naming me and you its Person of the Year in 2006, the Web browser was becoming just another app.

For companies such as Microsoft, Apple or Google to bet their farms on the Web browser would be silly.

Imagine Steve Jobs standing before his board describing Safari as a keystone of the company's future. It is unfathomable because the context of the connected experience is far broader than it was five years ago, and while that context has expanded far beyond the browser, it has only begun its disruptive evolution.

Moore's Law tells us that this evolution will be exponential and that we are mere moments from a new set of changes that will be infinitely more disruptive.

Creating a connected experience

In the short term, the changes affecting how people interact with digital content will undoubtedly come in the forms of ubiquitous broadband connectivity, inspiring new devices, and the addicting applications and services that are being used on them.

Of those three, it is the applications that will be at the core of the connected experience.

The best devices will be the ones that provide a great platform for applications and then get out of the way.

Look at Apple's i-devices for example.

Apple's success with i-devices is in many ways about how transparent the hardware is: the iPhone has three buttons and the rest are apps.

In fact, those i-devices have already driven more than 10 billion mobile app downloads, and that is just the birth of the movement.

The number of mobile apps downloaded globally across devices is going to rise to 60 billion by 2013, according to some forecasts.

In emerging markets like Russia, revenue from mobile apps has already outgrown handset revenue.

Although apps are the context for digital content, an app's success has as much to do with the experience that it delivers as it does the content it contains. Many apps deliver similar content, but few rise to the surface of the app stores.

Winners or losers in the content-consumption race

Let us start with Flipboard, for instance.

Voted last year's iPad "App of the Year," Flipboard defined the digital magazine category for tablet computers by aggregating content from around the Web and compiling it into a compelling "magazine" interface.

Up until its most recent release, however, the content it delivered was limited.

Yet, because the experience was so powerful – and the app so popular – publishers were rushing to get featured within its garden of content.

In many ways, it was the experience that drew the users, and the content followed.

In Flipboard's most recent release, the content available is far broader than it has been previously. This advancement should delight the large user base that Flipboard built by delivering an innovative content-consumption experience.

Netflix is another such example.

To be successful, a service such as Netflix needs to be available on anything that has a screen. If Netflix is not available on my TV, laptop, tablet or car, then what good is the content it has?

If Netflix cannot follow users throughout their connected experience, chances are they will find and, ultimately, settle for a competitor with a smaller content inventory who will.

Again, it is the experience that is key, meaning that despite their vast library, Netflix's content alone would not be able to save the customer from defecting.

Let us not forget Twitter, which is also making headlines with its own app story.

As one of the most popular social media platforms in the world boasting more than 100 million users, the company provides a free-to-use Web site where users can send 140-character status updates to their followers.

However, along with the Web site, Twitter also has traditionally provided application programming interface (API) access to its content, which is a set of routines, protocols and tools for building software applications.

This access has allowed developers to create their own apps and add whatever value they want to the Twitter experience.

To date, there are more than 100,000 of these apps and right now, more than 75 percent of all Twitter usage comes from those applications and the rest from the free Web site.

The apps provide that powerful context for the content, and help weave Twitter throughout the connected experience of its users.

Twitter has been such a ubiquitous service, in large part, because of the app ecosystem that has been built around it.

However, Twitter recently announced that there will be stricter control over who accesses their API so that they can control the experience that their users have across all Twitter apps.

## Thinking beyond the browser

But it is not just about traditional or social media.

The kingdom of content is vast, and while it certainly includes consumer content such as music, movies, news and social chatter, it also includes business content.

Some of this content, such as market research, market forecasts, or financial data, may be a product of the business providing it, while other content including product information, sales performance, order fulfillment, video demonstrations or return-on-investment analysis will be content distributed internally to empower sales.

As more sales reps are equipped with smartphones and tablets, business-to-business app stores will become largely filled with sales enablement and CRM apps that will redefine the customer conversation in the Age of Apps.

So, while it would be silly for Microsoft or Google to focus their strategy on the Web browser, it would be equally ill-advised for business-to-consumer and B2B companies with content that they want to distribute – internally or externally – to base their digital marketing, content distribution or sales enablement strategies on a browser-based experience.

However, this may be difficult to come to terms with as many companies have not even fully adapted their model to account for the potentials of the Web browser.

Like it or not, that is the world we are entering. In virtually any scenario you can think of, someone will need to open an app for you to make a sale.

## Building a kingdom of content

So, what does it take to develop an app strategy? Start your journey by visiting the app store.

The user experience is the “product” that goes into the app store, not the content.

While content is a critical component of the experience, the real premium needs to be placed on both designing and engineering memorable and seamless branded user experiences.

Requirements definition, user experience design and software development are skills that most marketers will need to become more familiar with, along with app marketing.

Also, if an app is to successfully increase revenue for the business, it needs to be done correctly.

Make it a priority by putting it in someone’s job description to ensure that individual defines the requirements and the road map for the app in addition to overseeing how to market it.

Taking charge of the app store is only half of the strategy, though. Equal focus needs to be paid to the marketer’s access strategy.

Like Flipboard and Twitter, it is not just about the apps that you make, but it is also about

the apps that other developers are making.

If third parties can easily access your content, then your content becomes more valuable to them.

Will your content be featured in the next Flipboard or LinkedIn app?

That depends on both the demand for content, as well as its availability to developers. In the Age of Apps, often the latter trumps the former.

Today, developers are a new audience for your content, and you need to make sure you meet their needs.

### Succeeding in the Age of Apps

So as apps are rendering obsolete everything from record and bookstores to local libraries, they will also relegate spreadsheets, order forms, and data sheets to the back office of business communications.

Both the rise in wireless connectivity and the enormous array of new connected devices will put apps – mobile, Web, tablet and TV – at the heart of the user experience, whether those users are consumers, business customers or sales professionals.

Applications will provide the context for consuming content of all kinds, and those who deliver the most compelling context will better engage their target audiences. They are the ones that will reign in the Age of Apps.

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