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Battlefield mobile: Twitter Cards versus Facebook Home

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It is already old news that mobile is the future, with some predicting that usage will overtake desktop as soon as next year. The platforms, brands and publishers that crack the code will thrive, and those that do not will perish.

Facebook and Twitter are both acutely aware of this fact and are aggressively innovating to stay a step ahead. Not just to make a leading mobile application, but to become central to the entire mobile ecosystem.

To this end, two major announcements were made last week: the release of new mobile app deep-linking Twitter Cards, and Facebook Home, the new modified Android operating system. These two product releases reveal two unique ploys to seize the mobile throne.

Facebook Home

On April 4, Facebook announced Facebook Home, a bold step towards permeating the mobile experience.

Facebook Home literally puts Facebook on the home screen of your smartphone, with social functionality woven throughout the experience. The features focus on a seamless,

omnipresent layer of social connectivity integrated into all device functions.

Does this functionality succeed in permeating the mobile experience? Absolutely. But will consumers adopt this new OS? This is Facebook's greatest challenge.

To address this, instead of producing their own device or an entirely new operating system, Facebook chose to create a modification on Android, the world's most-adopted mobile OS, to take advantage of the open platform and tap into the massive user base as a distribution channel.

Even still, will consumers want the full-on Facebook phone?

Historically new Facebook products, features and updates are met with vocal resistance. But Facebook has proven time and time again that its consumers ultimately adopt and benefit from the innovations.

The possibilities are awe-inspiring.

To start, the modified Android OS will be available on the suitably named HTC First. But it will not be long before other phone manufacturers follow suit, driving further distribution.

And for international adoption, it does not take too much imagination to foresee the manufacturer partnership model evolving to get inexpensive, subsidized, data-light handsets into the hands of emerging markets, establishing Facebook as the default mode of communication worldwide and creating Facebook-first users for life.

All that being said, despite the clear advantages of its massive user base and open development platform, a bet on Android could lead to dangers down the road.

Facebook and Google are direct competitors with overlapping advertiser budgets, products and revenue streams.

For now, the gloves are down. But as Facebook continues to introduce new products and features, especially those that are competitive to Google products – Facebook App Store and Google Play – Google could start to feel a little less comfortable with the whole idea and start putting up roadblocks.

Twitter Cards

Twitter is taking a more subtle approach.

If Facebook's mobile strategy is a platform play for pervasive social connectivity, Twitter is making a bet on content.

Without great content, apps and experiences, mobile is just a blank screen. A content strategy is a mobile strategy. Twitter understands this better than anyone, and it shows in its most recent product developments and partnerships.

Twitter Cards surface richer content contained within tweets themselves.

Whereas a link to a photo, video or article previously drove out to the host experience, the Twitter Card allows users to engage with the content directly within the Twitter

environment.

This enriches the experience, and also gives Twitter more control to collect richer data and create new advertising opportunities.

Two days before the announcement of Facebook Home, Twitter released one of the more subtle but meaningful Twitter Card innovations to date: mobile app deep-linking. This enables users to navigate directly to specific content within other app experiences from a tweet.

The implications are discrete – a Trojan horse maneuver to become the backbone of the mobile ecosystem. Here is why:

Publishers, entertainment properties, and developers continue to put out better content and the app experiences to house it. This is a good thing for consumers. But it has also created a new challenge: app overload.

Are we really supposed to have one app for The New York Times news, another for The Wall Street Journal news, another for ESPN highlights and so on?

The Flipboards and Zites of the world have tackled this multi-app, multi-content source challenge with aggregation and visualization solutions, pulling content into a single, elegant app experience. But that means that to date, smartphone users have had to choose between multiple apps or aggregators.

Twitter's new mobile deep-linking suddenly means you do not have to. It breaks down the walls of siloed apps to form a fluid mobile content ecosystem.

As people consume and share content in real-time, app deep linking enables them to weave in and out of mobile experiences seamlessly. And once deep-linked into another app experience, you are not jettisoned out of Twitter's orbit.

In fact, many of these partners already port Twitter conversations directly into their apps, as well as encourage sharing back out from those experiences, creating a virtuous circle: discover, consume, share and discover again.

In this way, Twitter behaves like a social navigation – an unofficial mobile operating system, arguably more fluid and efficient than a device's proprietary OS.

Connections or content?

Twitter and Facebook are both building platforms to own the mobile ecosystem in their own ways, playing to their respective strengths.

Ultimately, Facebook helps you connect with the people you care about, and Twitter helps you connect with the content you are passionate about.

The friends and stories that we love are intrinsically intertwined and vital parts of all of our lives. I do not think we will be choosing one over another any time soon.

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