

COLUMNS

Why managing an app should be as easy as a Web site

March 18, 2014



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There are many analogies that can be drawn between the emergence of Web sites in the 1990s and the emergence of mobile applications in the 2000s. But it took nearly a decade for Web sites to mature as a marketing and sales channel, while mobile apps have exploded in barely a few short years.

According to Gartner, apps, mobile and otherwise, will account for \$77 billion in revenue by 2017. The problem is that many retailers have not made the shift yet from treating apps like just another marketing channel to treating them like an entirely new and powerful medium for consumer outreach and engagement.

Once companies make that mental adjustment, the imperative for solutions that enable deep user insights as well as rapid testing, iterating and customization of mobile apps becomes immediately apparent.

A manual coding approach to app management will not suffice.

Retailers should apply technology that makes it as easy to manage mobile apps as it is to manage today's Web sites. That means collecting actionable user data, running A/B tests to gauge the performance of different features and layouts, and customizing the user

experience for different audiences.

Here is how.

Mobile app user data

Choosing the data you want to collect from mobile apps is easy. Collect it all. You should not have to choose, and technology should not limit you.

With a combination of audience data and usage data, you can correlate the variables that lead to higher engagement and conversion rates.

The more you know, the better you can respond to the wants and needs of your app users.

More data alone, however, does not equal more insight.

The other piece of the equation is knowing how to filter and analyze the data after it is collected to glean information that will help improve performance.

As with a corporate Web site, you may not know ahead of time what you should be measuring. That is why having analytics tools that make it possible to query data and understand the impact of multiple usage scenarios is so critical to success.

There was little will or budget to invest in this level of examination until recently.

However, given the growth of the mobile app channel, sophisticated analysis has gone from being an idle consideration to an absolute necessity.

The one thing you need to know: Where mobile app usage data is concerned, collect everything up front and invest in the analytics tools that will bring meaning to that data after the fact.

A/B testing for mobile apps

In Web site marketing, data-driven optimization has become the norm. Companies examine what works, test different hypotheses, and deliver new designs or content based on the measurable reaction of Web site users.

One impact of this trend is that there are fewer significant Web site refreshes than there are rolling updates based on user response.

Instead of being solely a broadcast medium, Web sites are now more dynamic because of the back-and-forth communication between users – through their on-site behavior – and publishers.

Mobile apps are headed in the same direction.

You can see this trend both in the acceleration of app update cycles and in the increased focus from major brands on app testing strategies.

Facebook recently released details on its own mobile A/B testing framework, which it created within the last two years to measure and improve the user experience in its native iOS and Android apps.

The framework started out supporting only one or two experiments at a time, and has

since evolved to support many experiments running simultaneously.

Facebook says the framework lets it "improve our apps faster than ever."

Some large brands may have the resources to build their own testing tools, but for most companies, it is much more practical to take advantage of A/B testing platforms that already exist.

In fact, as is the case with Web sites, solutions exist that enable business users to conduct sophisticated A/B testing without having to write code.

Whatever route you choose, however, the need for app testing and optimization has become widely apparent. A/B testing is now a competitive requirement in mobile app marketing.

The one thing you need to know: Big brands are investing major resources in A/B testing for mobile apps.

However, you do not have to build your own testing framework as long as you find a solution that gives you the ability to test and iterate quickly with new app updates.

Mobile app customization and personalization

Although the app testing trend has only taken off in the last two years, app customization and personalization have quickly followed on its heels.

Consider how Zappos tailors app product alerts based on a user's browsing preferences. And how the Gilt app lets users search for matching clothes by comparing the colors of items in their inventory to a user's uploaded photos.

Again, delivering targeted experiences on company Web sites has been the standard for years, which is partly why the strategy has emerged so quickly in the mobile app world.

One other reason, however, is that companies no longer have to submit every user interface variation to an app store and then wait through a long approval process.

Solutions are available today that allow you to create app layout changes and target multiple content variations to different audiences without resubmitting your app to an app store.

With the right technology, you can customize your app on the fly, building off of the insight you gain from app usage data and A/B testing results to deliver a targeted experience and, ultimately, to drive better performance.

The one thing you need to know: Effective app customization is possible when you understand user response and can make app changes in real time.

THE EVOLUTION OF mobile apps mirrors the evolution of Web sites in many ways, but the trajectory of growth is much faster and, as a result, retailers have less room for error and more reason to try to develop competitive advantage quickly.

Retailers should seriously consider automated solutions as manual-coding approaches

will not keep pace with the speed of today's mobile market.

The strategies for success are evident in the history of retail Web sites. Now it is time to execute aggressively on those strategies in the mobile app marketing field.

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