

Mobile website, or is an app more apt?

Mobile Internet technology continues to evolve at a rapid rate - right now its popularity is at an all-time high. Needless to say most businesses are keen to get on board.

Thanks to developments in third generation mobile technology (3G) the 'smart phone' is the ultimate 'convergence' device supporting fast broadband, transmission of voice, text, multimedia and video. Within the space of a few short years, smart phones have won more than 60% market share.

Australian consumers are increasingly engaging in a wider range of activities on their mobile phones, including accessing the Internet. General browsing, accessing news, sport and weather updates, banking, downloading music and purchasing goods and services are among the most popular activities.

Mobile applications or 'apps' are now running at about 16.7 million app downloads per day. Given that staggering statistic, should your business have an app? Well, not necessarily. The other player in the mobile marketplace, also immensely popular but seldom discussed in mainstream media, is the mobile-optimised website or 'mobile website'.

Here begins the robust debate for businesses entering the mobile space: mobile app or mobile website? Which is more important or better for your business?

If you own a smart phone you are likely to be familiar with the benefits of both apps and mobile websites including easy-to-access information and instant transactions.

A mobile app is stand-alone downloadable software for mobile devices. Generally developed with the user experience in mind, apps capitalise on smart phone features such as the inbuilt GPS or camera to offer an interactive experience and perform a specific task.

From a technical perspective this allows fast load times and the ability to tap into elements already installed in the mobile device to improve its functionality.

The downside is mobile apps are device specific and need to be downloaded and installed. Considering the number of platforms available - Android, Symbian, Maemo, BlackBerry, iPhone and Windows Mobile just to name a few - it is a fragmented and highly competitive space. Android alone has grown its share of the smart phone market by more than 600% since entering the market, putting it ahead of Apple and BlackBerry.

Some would say mobile apps offer a richer user experience than mobile websites simply because until recently, the mobile browsing experience was not very user-friendly. However, thanks to faster and better next generation mobile technology this no longer needs to be the case.



Essentially a mobile website offers similar functions to a normal website but on a smaller screen. Its primary purpose is to deliver accessible, user-friendly information by a mobile phone's Internet connection.

Deadline has worked with car dealership Hamilton Holden to create a mobile-optimised website. Based on consumer understanding it was determined that most people in the market for a used car do some preliminary research on the web then head out to visit dealers. The best fit was a mobile website that offered essential information, location, and feature details about the cars and the services available. As a value-add for existing customers there is also a "book a service" feature specifically optimised for mobile devices.

One benefit of mobile websites is that they offer the website owner greater market reach than downloadable mobile apps. When you create a mobile website, it can operate on any Internet capable mobile device via a browser and does not need software downloads.

Mobile websites do not have to comply with the stringent, and sometimes subjective guidelines enforced by the various App Stores (e.g. Apple, Google or BlackBerry), which can see business left at the mercy of app distributors. Apple, for example, charges a 30% fee for distribution through its iStore and impose compulsory policies built around Apple's commercial objectives rather than consumer demand. Android, on the other hand, employs a policy that considers the demands of the market.

Business must also consider the ongoing implications of managing apps. Updates in distributor operating systems can require an app to be fine-tuned to comply, which obviously comes at a cost.

Consumers are demanding a more sophisticated brand experience, optimised for mobile devices. Research has indicated that within five years more people will be using the Internet through their mobile devices than a PC - it's a huge market.

Clearly, mobile apps and mobile websites have their pros and cons. The key to determining the right fit for your business lies with your consumers. The first step is to ask your customers what they will use. Do they want to perform a specific task or just access information? What will make dealing with you over their mobile easier and/or better for them? Consulting with your customers to determine what their preferences are is really just Marketing 101!

So the obvious question: what is the financial outlay? This depends on what you determine your customers' needs to be. Whether it be an app or a mobile website, the cost of development varies greatly and you generally get what you pay for. For example, if you are in the market for a very basic mobile website with limited interactivity there are several DIY tools available.

But if you want to offer your consumers a professional, interactive, multifunctional sophisticated mobile experience that demonstrates you are serious about servicing their needs then you are best to engage a professional, such as Deadline.

So the outlay doesn't have to be huge but you need to get it right to cater for your customer's needs. The key is, know your customer base.

Sean Heyten
Managing Director, Deadline