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DIGITAL COMMUNICATION SERVICES

Mobile for B2B

Native or Web?

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Intro

Mobile for B2B Series

This paper is one of a series we've written to help answer some of the questions we often hear from clients now that mobile content is firmly on the B2B marketing agenda.

Web apps or native apps? How to optimise content? What should an app look like? Why might I need an app and how can it benefit my marketing activities?

This series aims to give some useful context for anyone considering how to make the most of mobile as a marketing channel.

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'Going mobile'

As the first of this series, we want to start this paper by highlighting the mobile opportunity and defining what we mean by native and web apps.

One of the keys to successful marketing is having something (of value) to say, and someone (who wants to hear it) to say it to. To do that you need to understand your audience and have some insight into their needs around which you can shape your messaging. That as a principle applies across any marketing channel.

So assuming you have a valuable message to share and an audience receptive to hearing it, then mobile is becoming an increasingly interesting platform for B2B marketers bringing new opportunities to reach customers and new ways to engage with them.

Mobile Internet use has seen massive growth over the last few years with a recent study (by [Kantar Worldpanel](#)) suggesting that around 50% of the UK mobile phone users now own Smartphones.

That said our recent research in partnership with The Marketing Society '[What Works Where in B2B](#)' showed that as a channel mobile still has some way to go in establishing itself as an essential tool in the B2B marketing kit. It is understandable – the spend on the medium is low and so, at the moment, is the time spent on it. Given Smartphone adoption, 3G penetration and unlimited data plans that have driven a surge of mobile media consumption across geographies and deepened the integration of mobile devices into everyday life, we believe that in a year's time the picture may be

different, particularly given the predictions that by 2014 mobile internet will have taken over desktop internet usage (Gigacom - Mary Meeker: Mobile Internet Will Soon Overtake Fixed Internet).

Native or Web?

There is now much debate over whether marketers should be planning native or web apps. We are often asked which is best or which one should be used. Both have their pros and cons and to be quite honest, there is no clear winner. Sadly the honest (and non-committal) answer is "it depends..." and sometimes the answer might even be "both".

In this paper we'll highlight some of the key considerations in making your decision.

Let's start with a definition, or two:

Native apps are downloaded from secure locations such as the iTunes app store and are then stored locally on your device. They can be accessed with or without a data connection (though some functionality may require a data connection).

Web apps are developed for a mobile device but accessed directly through a browser, they can be bookmarked to appear on your devices home screen like a native app but always require a data connection to access them.

Should you be 'app-nostic'?

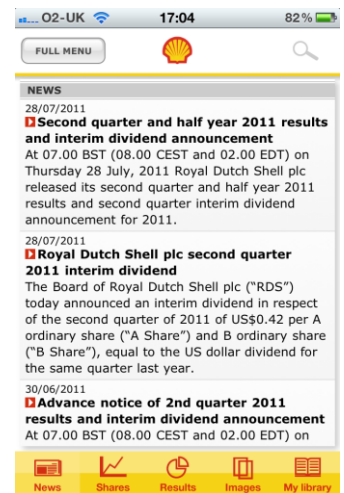
With more than 500,000+ apps and growing, the Apple's iOS platform is probably the most obvious destination for native apps. However Google's Android OS is providing stiff competition to Apple, having recently passed Apple in terms of global market share - although Android is not anywhere near iOS in terms of revenue.

The decision about the device(s) you develop apps for should be led by your audience - it's important to spend some time researching what device your target audience primarily uses for business connectivity.

The geographic location of your end user is often a major factor in building an app which is on the right device for your audience. For example, Blackberry devices continue to be popular among Enterprise users but also more generally in the US market, although their market share is declining with Android & iOS fast becoming more accepted in the business world. Additionally, over the last year alone, there has been a 30% increase in business users owning and operating their own handset. Whilst the iPhone's popularity continues it is no longer the dominant device in some key geographies (mobile-device.biz).

Another consideration is the potential need to cater to the increasingly popular tablet market, in particular the iPad - which is in many cases the biggest sources of "mobile" traffic to websites.

In some situations it's simply not enough to create one version of an app. For some large organisations, there is a need to develop a native app for iOS and Android **plus** a web app to cater for the remaining Smartphone platforms such as BlackBerry, WP & Symbian. It is an approach that many big companies have taken - Shell is a good example - their multi-platform approach is powerful as it will allow almost all Smartphone users to interact with the Shell brand. Whilst offset somewhat by the sheer size of the brand, the obvious downside is the development and maintenance cost of these will be more than if they were to develop only one.



Considerations

In deciding which route to take with an app, there are a number of factors that must be considered. To better understand the differences and how they might affect *your* decision we have outlined some of the key differences between the approaches of native vs. web app.

Device compatibility

Native apps are only compatible with the operating system they were intended for, so iOS apps will only work on iPhones, Android apps will only work on Android phones and so on - although there are plans for Blackberry to allow Android apps to work on the OS.

Web apps can counter this as they will work across a variety of browsers on a variety of devices. This is obviously powerful, but the caveat is that they therefore require extensive cross-browser testing to ensure they work across the ever growing range of smartphones.

Development and maintenance costs

Native apps require platform-specific development tools and knowledge of the specific platforms on which the app is to reside. Currently, the most popular platforms are Apple's iOS and Google's Android, which have a very large combined market share. However you also need to consider less popular platforms including Windows Phone, Blackberry & Symbian, each with a significant user base of their own. Each new platform potentially requires creation of a separate app (see our paper on Cross Compiled Apps for more on this).

Web apps require the same degree of planning up-front and a similar design process, but you only need to build one app, which will then

work across different devices - as long as they have a web browser.

Audience reach

Native apps generally cater for smaller audiences than web apps, as your content can only be used by the audience with the device that the app has been designed and built for. However, browsing an 'app store' for a native app is often the first point of call for users, giving an intuitive discovery mechanism for your audience. However you should not adhere to the "build it and they will come" approach as your app is among thousands of other apps that your user might download. You need to work hard to get *your* app the visibility it needs to succeed.

One significant benefit of success with this is if you succeed in getting the user to download your app, you have, by default, a presence on that user's 'home screen' which is quite a powerful place to be - particularly if your app is regularly updated via push notifications.

Web apps have the potential for far greater reach as they are not device dependent. Hosting an app on the web, however, does limit some user's likelihood of discovering the app. Audience reach for web apps can also be broader because web apps can be developed to work on older and less powerful phones - as long as they have a browser. This alone could be a very important consideration when trying to reach audiences in developing markets.

Geographic reach

Native apps rely heavily on the market penetration in the targeted geography. For instance, in India, where Smartphone penetration is still relatively low, a native app on either iPhone or Android would be inappropriate as 'feature phones' (less powerful phones offering some

Smartphone-style features, but at a lower cost) are far more popular.

Web apps are not platform dependent and therefore are far more appropriate for markets where device penetration is lower or if your audience uses a wide range of mobile devices and operating systems. It is important though to identify the devices your audience is most likely to be using so that the app can be tested and optimised specifically for these.

Installations and updates

Native app updates must be released or deployed by the developer through an app-store platform (a process that takes time due to store-approval processes) and are downloaded by the user, when they browse for updates. This makes the process of addressing issues more cumbersome with the potential for bugs that render an app useless sometimes taking weeks to update.

Web apps are hosted on the web, meaning any update is automatically made with the refresh of a browser – instantaneously.

Distribution

Native apps, as mentioned previously, are subject to a review and approval process by app store staff, which can take several weeks. Consequently, if an app needs to be live quickly, this is a potential issue and must be considered.

Web apps simply require a compatible browser and an internet connection and can be uploaded or removed in real time.

Device capabilities and integration

Native apps can take full advantage of a smartphone's functional capability by accessing things like the phone's camera, GPS locator, gyroscope and accelerometer. If you wish your app to make use of any of these, then a native

app would almost certainly be the best way to go.

Web app functionality is far more limited, but is improving with the use of things like geo-location and multiple orientation support becoming more common.

SEO

Native apps are more difficult to discover via the web, but people searching the name of an app will produce app-store holding pages within search results for both iOS and Android.

Web apps, on the other hand, are searchable on the web in the same way any other part of your site and are far more search engine friendly.

Analytics

Tracking your app is hugely important to better understand its effectiveness in the marketplace.

Native app tracking can be built into the app but is not included by default. Tracking native apps has the benefit of recording how many people have downloaded your app and how much they use it. This is valuable both in the initial launch to understand how well it has initially been received but also in the longer term as you will be able to see how regularly the app is accessed by its users. This will also allow you to consider what updates and additions you can include to increase the app's life span.

Web apps can be tracked using the same methods as you would use on a standard website – for example using Google Analytics. One disadvantage to web-apps, however, is that you won't know how many people have saved your app to their handset home screen.

Discoverability

Native apps for B2B companies are often going to have a smaller target audience than mass market consumer apps and can therefore suffer somewhat from the established distribution model. Typically distribution relies on a user searching for an app, following a link or seeing an app-store feature on the app. In this busy (and growing!) market place, more niche apps may fall through the cracks, as they are unlikely to be promoted and rely on your audience knowing about your app or searching for your company to see if you have an app.

Web apps potentially allow for easier discovery by your audience, but marketing efforts to get people continually using the app - ideally saving it to their home screen, can be more complicated.

Internet access

Native apps often don't need internet access to function as they can store large amounts of data on the phone itself allowing people to use the app offline. However, if you wish to provide access to a live database or allow searches, you'll need a connection.

Web apps, on the other hand, generally require a constant internet connection, although some more basic functions can be optimised using the offline storage capabilities of technologies like HTML5.

Data storage

Native apps, as detailed above, require space on the device as the app's content is stored locally, this saves on loading times, particularly with rich media such as video or audio content, which can be available instantly and in high quality.

Web apps, on the other hand, shouldn't require any disk space as the app is stored online, although this means that any data that needs

loading must use an active internet connection. This often leads to video and audio content being compressed to provide a faster user experience, but resulting in lower quality media.

Content

The final key considerations in the webapp vs native debate is that however well something has been designed, either as a native app or for the web, having the right content, presented in the right way is the real key to an app's success.

Native apps allow for a richer level of audio/visual content that can be stored happily on the device and be called up in an instant, meaning images can be larger, video can be in HD and audio can be crystal clear, and more importantly, due to content sitting on the device, can be accessed offline.

Web apps, on the other hand, rely mainly on their internet connection, even in light of recent developments to HTML5's (the code in which web-apps are built) increasing offline storage capabilities. These apps live within a browser environment, meaning the presentation of the content relies on both these restrictions. For example, if a video is being used, the page that contains the video will need to load, as will the video, which will also need to buffer and stream, constantly relying on a steady and strong internet connection to power these functions.

Conclusions

Whilst it may sound inconclusive as a conclusion, the real answer to the native vs. web app question is that there's no correct answer. Both approaches have their drawbacks and each has their benefits.

As well as the considerations outlined in this document, the other papers in this series, which touch on security and design considerations, highlight some of the main things that anyone exploring app development needs to consider.

Ultimately the decision about native or web app will need to be made based on what your app needs to do and the audience it is intended to reach.

First and foremost, it's important to understand the audience that would use your app before you build the app they'll use.

Read the rest of the Mobile for B2B series.

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Omobono is an award winning digital agency specialising in brand development and engagement for large corporates and government.

We believe no one has a better understanding of business audiences and how to reach them.

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