Do You Need an App? Options for Improving Your Presence on the Mobile Web

Current Internet traffic trends indicate a shift from desktop and laptop Web usage to more and more coming from mobile devices like smartphones and tablets. According to StatCounter GlobalStats, the percentage of Web traffic from mobile devices grew from less than 1 percent in to 2009 to more than 10 percent in 2012. Expect that to be 15 percent in 2013, and to maintain or accelerate that rate of marketshare growth into the foreseeable future, says Mary Meeker of the venture capital firm Kleiner, Perkins, Caufield & Byers.

Are your customers among the early wave of mobile Web users? If so, what are the options for reaching this growing audience of mobile users?

Here are some current choices, with pros and cons to consider.

Create a custom, native app from scratch

What is it?
A lightweight program that is created specifically for one type of mobile operating system (Apple's iOS, Google's Android, Windows Mobile, Blackberry OS). These are the types of apps a user downloads through the iTunes Store or via Google Play.

What types of businesses should consider this option?
Among many reasons, one of the most obvious is that when the app actually is your product, you can charge for its purchase or facilitate sales or subscription transactions through the app. (Videogames have been the early leader in this type of business model.) Another reason is that the app can provide a unique interaction with, or access to, the products or services you sell. For instance, if your company provides unique data that can be enhanced with location, weather or other types of realtime information.

How to do it?
Unless your company already has in-house software developers, you'll need to explore the options of hiring a development team or creating a relationship with an outsource custom app development group.

Pros
An app can provide a business with a unique competitive advantage. Customers who grow dependent on your app will likely become some of your most loyal customers. To use a phrase popular these days, it can be a "game changer." It also can utilize all of the bells and whistles available with a native app operating system—for example, notifications.

Cons
The expense of creating such an app can be staggering. And it doesn't stop when the app is launched. Unlike creating a website, a business-critical native app is not merely a means to market your business—it is a user tool and requires a dedicated team to support its users. Updates to fix bugs and add functionality can become a constantly recurring—and frustrating to the user—requirement.

Utilize one of the variety of options that go by such names as "framework," "platform" or "app content management system" to create a native app.

What is it?
In an over-simplified explanation, these terms refer to various approaches that enable the creation of a native app without having to start from scratch. While not "custom," the various approaches can provide plenty of variations so that the app can look unique. Like the fully custom app, they are distributed through channels like the iTunes Store and Google Play.

What types of business should consider this option?
Again, in an over-simplified description, if you are not in the app-development business, but you need a full-featured app necessary to provide certain types of content, data or unique features that must be stored on a user's device (e.g., content that can be stored on the "cloud" and accessed by the user).

How to do it
If you are tech savvy and have a good understanding of design and user-experience (for example, if you created your own website and are pleased with it), you may try a do-it-yourself approach. However, if you are a small business owner or manager, you've likely already received dozens of email messages from those claiming to be able to build a native app for your business for some low price.

Beware of such promotion, as it can easily be a scam. However, there are reputable companies providing such services that you will likely want to use.

Pros
Full-featured native app, at a lower cost than re-inventing the wheel. A shorter development time, also.

Cons
Be wary. There are scammers who will promise to create an app for an incredibly low price. And new platforms and providers spring up constantly. Do lots of research before diving into the deep end of the pool. Also, as this is a native app, you'll need to create a different app for each mobile operating system.

Create a Web App

What is it?
It looks and works like a native app, but is accessed through your mobile device's Web browser. In essence, it's a website (you reach it at a URL, just like any website) that uses software, types of code (most notably, HTML-5) and design approaches that mimic the function, features and user-experience of a native app.

What types of business should consider this option?
Companies that want to create a feature, tool or utility that extends the usefulness of their service to a mobile device without the need to re-create the app for various mobile operating systems and distribution channels.

How to do it
While this category hasn't yet reached the point where there are plug-and-play solutions (like WordPress has become for blogs and simple websites, for example), solutions that are tailored to specific types of businesses (restaurants, for example) are rapidly emerging.

Pros
The most obvious is expense. You will save money in two ways: If you can find a reputable provider for custom Web app development with expertise in your industry, the cost will be a fraction of the cost related to a native app. More important, the app will work across all mobile operating systems and can be accessed without having to go through the iTunes Store or Google Play

Cons
There are certain features—certain types of notifications, for example—that won't be available with a Web app. And most important, the app is fully functional only when the user has Web access. On a smartphone, this likely is not a problem, but on a tablet without always-on web access, it can be problematic.

Redesign your site using "responsive" approaches

What is it?
This is a way to make your website "respond" to whatever device is being used to view it so that the display is optimized for the device being used, even the way the device is being held (landscape or portrait).

What types of business should consider this option?
If your website is primarily for marketing purposes rather than an online tool.

How to do it
More than likely, if you are using a service like WordPress.com to host your website, there are certain ways to add responsive design features to your current website. Longer term, you'll want to talk with your Web designer about creating a website that has a look and approach that takes advantage of HTML-5 to give it a look and features that

indicate you are not merely adapting to mobile devices, but are actually adapting your site to the way people most want to use it.

Pros
For most small businesses, the pros are the low cost involved and the comparatively short length of time required to implement it. Another major pro is that such an approach can be taken using your current content management system, meaning there will be no need for new training or any redundancies cause by the need to service multiple apps on various platforms.

Cons
While usable via mobile devices, it will not have the user bells and whistles you finds on native or web apps.