

Yes, there's an App for that, but is it right for the brand?

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+ Mobile devices have become the "Swiss Army Knives of the digital generation."

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I've been diving deeper into mobile design and mobile brand strategy for clients and recently published my first iPhone app. I learned a lot about the mobile industry along the way—the technologies involved, new design standards, and now, mobile marketing. One thing has become very evident—and perhaps it doesn't take a digital brand specialist to see it—most brands are making the same mistakes with apps that we all made with early websites.

We all rush to add a new platform without understanding how it works and what it means to our brands. As in the early '90s when every company raced to build a website because everyone else did, companies now race to publish mobile applications. And the same problems the industry had back then persist today with mobile.

Back in the '90s most websites weren't websites as we know them today but more like brochures full of corporate information. Websites have come a long way since then, and now many of them are sophisticated web applications that have become branded software products unto themselves. Companies have learned to leverage their brands online in more intelligent ways.

Now we're facing the same challenge with mobile.

Companies need to understand how mobile will best benefit their brand and what kind of technologies to invest in. Right now the most excitement is around apps, and with over 10k iPhone apps submitted to iTunes every day and over 3 billion (yes billion with a "B") paid and free apps downloaded so far, it's clear that building apps is a big, serious business.

According to Pinch Media, however, most mobile app usage drops off to nothing within one month, and many apps get deleted altogether. Mobile desktop space is prime real estate and with the right approach, a well crafted mobile app can function as a small part of a brand that becomes an integral part of a person's daily life. But it has to stay on the users' desktop to get the job done and to stay on the desktop; it's got to be well planned.

Mobile devices have become the "Swiss Army Knives of the digital generation." They go with us everywhere, they remind us of what we need to do, they get us where we need to go (most of the time), connect us to friends and family, and supply us with endless amounts of entertainment. Branded apps that figure out ways to add similar functionality—a bite-sized, anytime, anywhere extension of the desktop experience—have a good chance of staking a claim on a user's personal real estate (i.e., their mobile desktop).

Brands like Wired Product Reviews and NPR News are both great examples. Their mobile apps offer rich media content broken out into manageable pieces for different mobile devices. Essentially they've made their brand and content modular by repackaging it into discrete mobile apps. Tracking how mobile users consume media allows them to effectively port content out to this new platform and create an ongoing relationship through it. They've learned that tiny pieces of personal real estate can become a daily point of contact between brand and user.



Applications like Oakley Surf Report and REI Ski Report apps may not be used every day (unless you're very lucky), but they've become a trusted source of information for iPhone users gearing up for outdoor adventures. These apps are great examples of how physical products/brands extend themselves in the mobile world. They may not be on the first or even the second page of a user's desktop, but they still have a secure spot.

Of course, apps can also deliver clever, emotional brand connections that are meant to be fleeting or tied to a seasonal campaign or launch. In the world of luxury brands, some excellent examples come to mind. Bell&Ross has an iPhone app that allows users to try on their watches (virtually). Customers can select a watch from several models and colors, then hold their iPhone to their wrist, and check out the watch face details and the sweeping movement of the second hand. They might be done with the app once they're done shopping for a new watch, but there's no arguing the impact this app has on the Bell&Ross customer.

Mercedes Benz offers an iPhone app that creates the experience of the new C63 AMG. Users can watch videos, check out detailed specs, and peruse the AMG sound library where they can hear the cars, ignitions, engine revs and even a high-speed drive-by. And, once they've finished shopping, they're likely done with the app but in that brief window of time, they're probably opening it up several times a day as they think about their purchase decision.

Realistically, an app with a brief life span but high rate of daily usage is just as impactful as one that stays on the desktop and gets used once or twice a week—maybe even more.

Point being, when thinking about wading into this new space, it's important to consider how to make a connection with it. This isn't a banner ad or even a microsite. And it's not—and should never be—a website. It's a whole new way of interacting with the audience and if done right, the benefits will be huge. There are plenty of excellent examples out there—it just takes wading through a sea of poorly conceived ones to get to them or wait to hear about them from a friend.

Like other new industries, there is always excitement and a rush to be first to market, but it pays to listen to your brand followers and develop mobile products that fit their lives and go beyond the novel flavor of the week. For most brands right now, their apps are generating a lot of initial PR and not much else. The few that are doing their homework are successfully taking claim on users' personal real estate—and are definitely the ones to watch.