

How To Create a Compelling iPad App

With over 100 million iPads in circulation and Forrester Research Group estimating that 1 billion consumers will have smart phones and tablets by 2016 — it's little secret the digital device market is booming.

These sub-A4-sized, backlit, multi-touch devices provide a canvas for visual impact and interaction that takes content consumption to a new level. In the case of the iPad, Apple's beautiful industrial design is integrated into the iTunes machine — a massive shop window coupled with a seamless purchase experience. If you pick up your iPad from the coffee table, it's instantly on, instantly connected, and you can instantly choose which brands you want to lean back and enjoy.

The challenge for publishers is how best to harness the massive opportunity that the iPad represents in competition with 40,000 other apps. The stakes are high. Disappoint users and you're left with an often expensive, poorly rated failure. Do it right, attract a new audience and you could possibly unlock a new revenue source.

This article is focused on tips for creating a successful iPad app but the rules outlined here can equally apply to any tablet or smartphone app.

1. Define

Success and the app definition statement

There is often a driving force from senior management to produce a 'trophy' iPad app for a brand. This is a tough place to start from, as an app's success will never be measured by just being on the iPad.

It's important from the start to set Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) against which success is measured in three, six and nine months and beyond.

- **It's about reach:** Achieve Xk unique users
- **It's about generating direct revenue:** Deliver \$Xk sales
- **And it's about brand placement and industry recognition:** Attain chart position X, star rating Y and awards Z

Distill down the high level objectives into a one or two sentence elevator pitch that encompasses the app's mission — the Application Definition Statement (ADS). An ADS is composed of three distinct parts: differentiator, solution and audience. An example of an ADS for the Weather app of the iPhone could be: Easy-to-use weather forecaster for casual users.

The ADS gives you focus and can be used to qualify every feature suggestion made by the army of people who will want to be involved with your app.

Understand your market and user expectations

The iPad is still very much a premium device, which is reflected in the typically affluent user demographic and the US is by the far the largest market. The relative success of tech and financial titles such as Wired, Focus, FT and Economist reflect these demographics. Of note is that, unlike the iPhone, the iPad is currently much more of an at-home device shared by all the family. How will you shape your content into an app for that audience?

Prudent selection of content and features

Carefully consider the content and features your audience will expect from the app. Validate your thinking using polls or questionnaires via existing channels — it costs little and can save you time and money. We find it useful to introduce personas and use cases to discuss how real people might interact with the app. For a typical news app, the personas might be the "browse-headline-quickly guy" or the "end-to-end-article woman". By prioritizing the most important use cases for the app that comply with the ADS, the end product becomes a sharper proposition that is more likely to succeed.

The temptation is to try to include everything in version one. This often results in a slower time to market, more cost, and too little focus on the elements that will make the app compelling. Arguably the Daily iPad app, launched in January 2011, has many nice features but any news app must start quickly to avoid frustrating users — a common complaint of this app. Another challenge for publishers has been the huge file size of iPad magazines that frustrate users with slow, unreliable downloads and bloated iPad backups. Testing in a wider user group helps to pick up these issues. Remember, you have ample opportunity to roll out new features in version two and beyond — as your users will expect!

Content is still king. Think beyond existing assets for what could be included in the app to enhance the experience of users. For example, social media feeds or newly commissioned media can supplement existing print assets and make the experience more immersive. You can also create widgets such as custom interactive infographics, 360 images and online feed streams.

Use competing apps to qualify your feature and content set. What will be your unique selling points when users are presented with a choice of apps? Install and review your competition and build a matrix of features. Read app reviews to highlight which features, present or absent, generated feedback, positive or negative. A very relevant example for digital

magazines is support for both portrait and landscape orientations. In our experience, users demand both and the additional cost of supporting both orientations pays dividends. Aggressively limit the things your app will do and make sure you do them well.

2. Design

Simple, intuitive navigation

When creating apps, design is everything. There are few established iPad best practices, other than the recommendations Apple provide in their Human Interface Guidelines (HIG). While you may have digital design resources within your organization, this is a new medium and it can be worth getting advice from a specialist to ensure a slick end result. How you bring together the content and features into a cohesive, intuitive user experience is fundamental to the app's success. Small navigation features can make the app infinitely more usable, differentiate it and provide a 'wow' factor. The challenge when introducing new navigation concepts is that you must educate users, as we found on projects like BBC News and GoodFood. Tom Britton (thetrainline.com) sums this up perfectly: "Good design is telling the user what to do but making them think they figured it out for themselves."

Users have been critical of iPad apps that attempt to replicate too much of the print interaction on the iPad. In our experience, conventional is not the same as intuitive — the iPad is intended for much more than page turning.

At the other end of the scale, be wary of trying to do too much with the navigation. Expecting users to shake their iPad (using accelerometer functionality) to store a bookmark doesn't ooze class or inspire confidence.

Delight from the start

The Download-Try-Rate-Delete culture of apps means that first impressions are critical. Users expect immediate reward for downloading an app. Optimize the initial experience to fulfill that expectation.

Validate on the device ASAP

Changing designs once they've been developed is significantly more expensive than adjusting them earlier in the design stage. It is better to get the design right before a single line of code is written. We frequently take design concepts straight from Photoshop and put them onto the iPad as flat, actual-size images.

3. Develop

Find the right developer

Development resource for iOS applications is now more readily available but still comes at a premium. Ensure all "Define and Design" groundwork is laid out before development starts. An internal tech team may be eager to take on the challenge but remember that developing for the iPad is not just about competency in Objective C. There are a number of skills and best practices that are required in order to achieve a polished application that meets your objectives and is compelling to use.

If you outsource development, be sure to find a developer with a good track record. While collaborating remotely with a developer can produce results, we've found most favorable outcomes stem from close collaboration with clients, including regular workshops and regular prototype reviews.

In particular for publishers, there may be publishing platforms available to help you deploy an application quickly by branding an existing white-labeled app, while still publishing content with desktop tools you already use such as QuarkXPress or InDesign. This can be a cost-effective and rapid route to market.

Test, test, test

Users are pretty vocal and intolerant of apps that unexpectedly crash so don't underestimate the importance of testing or the effort required to bring an app up to production quality. Unlike traditional software, app testing needs to consider various combinations of operating system, connection method, device data (low on memory), locale etc. The test user set can be expanded depending on the budget and profile of the app, ultimately including "crowd sourcing" with testers paid per bug, which is a great way to harden the app.

4. Deploy

Apple approval and beyond

Once the app is production ready, it's time to submit it to Apple. This can take up to several weeks depending on their queue length, so it's best not to set any hard deadlines in terms of marketing until you have an approved app.

Marketing the app

There may be significant pressure to ensure your app achieves a position in iTunes' charts. A compelling app that is appropriately priced puts this within your control to some degree, but external factors also play a part.

“Good design is telling the user what to do but making them think they figured it out for themselves.”

— Tom Britton, thetrainline.com

Give Apple visibility of your app pre-launch with the hope they will include it in their "New & Noteworthy" section, for your relevant geography and category.

Create a supporting web page that gives users a clear indication of what the app does and how to get it. We've found producing animated videos supplemented with celebrity intros or voiceovers also helps.

Submit the app to review sites but note that the most popular sites now tend to charge for their services, so account for this in your marketing budget.

The app rating plays a significant part in users' willingness to install it, especially if it's premium. Inevitably, beyond the initial period of rating, the most vocal users are often those who are disappointed. Simple things such as frequent in-app prompts to rate the app, which has been instrumental in the success of apps like Angry Birds, can bring balance to your feedback.

What happens next?

Once the first version of your application has launched, catch your breath. It doesn't end here. In the rush to do something on the iPad, many people are so focused on initial launch, they forget that the application needs to be updated and improved to continue to perform.

Plan a roadmap of features you simply couldn't deliver in version one, and those that your vocal user base will request. Open a dialogue with

your user base via forums and the App Store. From a content production point of view, ensure you have considered the effort required to sustain the app longer, month-by-month. If you are publishing in tandem with a print publication, there'll be a separate set of work to do to get the tablet version launched and up-to-date too. Be sure to account for the costs of maintaining an app in a world where Apple regularly rolls out new iOS versions and hardware.

And finally...

The realities of delivering an app are harsh and there is no guarantee that a big brand name will guarantee success.

While we've talked specifically about the Apple eco-system, the same goes for any platform: delivering an app is like delivering any product to market. You have to think about your customer, set goals and targets, prioritize to deliver key features first, and get skilled assistance when you need it.

Good luck!

How to create a compelling iPad app, by Shaun Barriball, Vice President of Mobile Products, Quark Software Inc., was first published in *InPublishing Magazine* Mar/Apr 2011

About

App Studio is the next generation digital publishing solution that uses HTML5 to push the bounds of user experience without the high cost and effort associated with custom app development. By combining the market-leading HTML5 technology from the recent acquisition of PressRun with Quark's existing digital publishing technology, App Studio is the only digital publishing solution that allows users to

create branded content apps using QuarkXPress, InDesign, HTML5, and XML. Through a managed cloud environment, designers, authors, and extended teams are able to collaborate to create rich, interactive content that can be delivered across multiple platforms and devices.

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