An iPad for Board Work: Take Two

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When I first wrote about my experience with the iPad, I sensed that a threshold had been crossed—that Apple had achieved such a breakthrough on tablet usability that it might change the fundamentals of the board portal space.

On the day the iPad hit the stores, we offered browser support, and very quickly directors throughout the customer base were using it for accessing meeting information.

But it was the realization that the iPad was something special that made us rethink our roadmap, and greenlight a major investment in the development of a native app for BoardVantage. By that I mean, not a browser, but an application that is coded in Apple's iOS and optimized for the iPad's form factor. Knowing what we know now (25+ million units sold so far) this decision would be a slam dunk. At the time it was anything but. We were all keenly aware of the long list of hardware manufacturers that tried their hand at tablets only to see them flop in the market. The last thing we wanted was to make a seven-figure investment in a device that would meet the same

fate. Who knows, the iPad could start strong but stall after the initial hype wore off. Of course that's not what happened.

Eighteen months later, it's safe to say that it turned out to be an excellent bet. Today, over ninety percent of our directors access our portal from the iPad. Nine out of ten demos are driven by iPad requirements. Traditional boards who never dreamt of abandoning their paper are suddenly hot prospects, and existing customers routinely approach us with the news they just bought iPads for their board.

Now with the app at a mature state, let me update you on my own experiences of using it for board work. First, as a recap, the advantages that existed in 2010 remain unchanged. The screen quality is unmatched. Its form factor and feather weight make it a hassle-free travel companion. There is no learning curve—unless you count the swiping action to advance screens. And it is always on. Of course, to support such an elegant interface, Apple had to make some trade-offs. They also remain unchanged. It is no laptop replacement if you're a power user. And, although it's fine for

making an occasional annotation, no one should make the mistake of buying it as an editing tool. It is at heart a sublime consumption device.

But besides these hardware-centric advantages, there is another aspect that makes the iPad so exciting. That is its unique strength in graphics and animation. The next time you watch a network show or NFL game, keep an eye out for the Apple commercials. What you will see is a parade of cool consumer apps that take advantage of these capabilities. In our Meeting Center app you will find that same caliber of graphics. And those graphics are not just for sizzle. They let us present meeting information in way that's far more efficient and elegant than you can on a laptop.

Let's look at specifics.

Whenever I prepare for a board meeting, there are certain things I need direct access to. Besides the meeting materials, I need to know which board members are attending, and who in the CS office is prepping the materials. I also need the particulars of hotel and travel arrangements, and since those plans don't always stay fixed, I would like updates if they change. With Meeting Center, I now get all that in one place. With a few swipes I can drill down to all the board material of the current meeting, review the minutes from the last meeting, check out whether the hotel has an adequate fitness club, and get an update if the dinner spot has changed—all in about the time it took you to read this. Try doing that with paper.

The other thing I often need is access to previous board meetings to check what was presented at the time. That's where the Meeting Timeline comes in. It gives me a view of the library of prior meetings with one touch. Now I can 'time-travel' through years of material in seconds. In other words, I have a bird's eye view of all my meetings, prior, current or future.

Let me close by pointing out that none of this would be possible in a browser. True, you can view an agenda but soon you will find yourself 'swimming' around the screen because browsers don't play well with the scale and proportions of the iPad. They were optimized for PCs with large monitors. And they work very well for that purpose. But the iPad is a new device, a 'third device', that fits somewhere between a laptop and cell phone. To realize its full potential, an investment must be made in developing a native app, otherwise the iPad's vaunted usability will go unrealized. But once that is done you get a transformative result. That's why it's hard to overstate the quality of experience of the iPad app. It leads me to believe that even the most traditional directors will now be open to using technology in their boardroom!

Take-Aways

» The iPad combines the immediacy of online access with the readability of print in a lightweight and compact package.

» The iPad has a unique strength in graphics and animation that is well-suited for presenting large volumes of information in a uniquely intuitive and efficient manner.

» The security of the board portal app should be independent of device security. It should provide encrypted offline storage, expiration of content including director notes, syncing to content updates and remote purge capabilities in case the device is lost or stolen.

» The result is an experience that is not only better than the browser, it is also better than print. That's why the iPad is rapidly turning into a must-have communication tool for leadership teams.