What's the Difference Between a Mobile Website and an App (Application)?

Before you can evaluate the benefits of a mobile website vs. an app it's important to understand the key differences between the two.

Both apps and mobile websites are accessed on handheld devices such as smartphones (e.g. iPhone, Android and Blackberry) and tablets.

- A [mobile website](#) is similar to any other website in that it consists of browser-based HTML pages that are linked together and accessed over the Internet (for mobile typically WiFi or 3G or 4G networks).
- The obvious characteristic that distinguishes a mobile website from a standard website is the fact that it is designed for the smaller handheld display and touch-screen interface.
- Increasingly, [responsive web design](#) is becoming the new standard for websites that are not only mobile-friendly, but that can scale to any sized device - from desktop down to tablet and handheld smartphones.
- Like any website, mobile websites/responsive sites can display text content, data, images and video. They can also access mobile-specific features such as click-to-call (to dial a phone number) or location-based mapping.
- ❖ Apps are actual applications that are downloaded and installed on your mobile device, rather than being rendered within a browser.
- ❖ Users visit device-specific portals such as Apple's App Store, Android Market, or Blackberry App World in order to find and download apps for a given operating system.
- ❖ The app may pull content and data from the Internet, in similar fashion to a website, or it may download the content so that it can be accessed without an Internet connection.

Which is Better – an App or a Mobile (Responsive) Website?

When it comes to deciding whether to build a native app or a mobile website, the most appropriate choice really depends on your end goals.

- ❖ If you are developing an interactive game an app is probably going to be your best option. But if your goal is to offer mobile-friendly content to the widest possible audience then a mobile website is probably the way to go.
- ❖ In some cases you may decide you need both a mobile website and a mobile app, but it's pretty safe to say that it rarely makes sense to build an app without already having a mobile website in place.
- ❖ Generally speaking, a mobile website should be considered your first step in developing a mobile web presence, whereas an app is useful for developing an application for a very specific purpose that cannot be effectively accomplished via a web browser.

Advantages of a Mobile Website vs. Native Apps

If your goals are primarily related to marketing or public communications, a mobile/responsive website is almost always going to make sense as a practical first step in your mobile outreach strategy. This is because a mobile website has a number of inherent advantages over apps, including broader accessibility, compatibility and cost-effectiveness.

Immediacy – Mobile Websites Are Instantly Available

- ✓ A mobile website is instantly accessible to users via a browser across a range of devices (iPhone, Android, BlackBerry, etc).
- ✓ Apps on the other hand require the user to first download and install the app from an app marketplace before the content or application can be viewed - a significant barrier between initial engagement and action/conversion.

Compatibility – Mobile Websites are Compatible Across Devices

- ✓ A single mobile website can reach users across many different types of mobile devices, whereas native apps require a separate version to be developed for each type of device.
- ✓ Furthermore, mobile website URLs are easily integrated within other mobile technologies such as SMS, QR Codes and near field communication (NFC).

Upgradability – Mobile Websites Can Be Updated Instantly

- ✓ A mobile website is much more dynamic than an app in terms of pure flexibility to update content.
- ✓ If you want to change the design or content of a mobile website you simply publish the edit once and the changes are immediately visible; updating an app on the other hand requires the updates to be pushed to users, which then must be downloaded in order to update the app on each type of device.

Findability – Mobile Websites Can be Found Easily

- ✓ Mobile websites are much easier for users to find because their pages can be displayed in search results and listed in industry-specific directories, making it easy for qualified visitors to find you.
- ✓ Most importantly, visitors to your regular website can be automatically sent to your mobile site when they are on a handheld (using device-detection).
- ✓ In contrast, the visibility of apps are largely restricted to manufacturer app stores.

Shareability – Mobile Websites Can be Shared Easily by Publishers, and Between Users

- ✓ Mobile website URLs are easily shared between users via a simple link (e.g. within an email or text message, Facebook or Twitter post).
- ✓ Publishers can easily direct users to a mobile website from a blog or website, or even in print. An app simply cannot be shared in this fashion.

Reach – Mobile Websites Have Broader Reach

✓ Because a mobile website is accessible across platforms and can be easily shared among users, as well as search engines, it has far greater reach capability than a native app.

LifeCycle – Mobile Websites Can't be Deleted

✓ The average shelf-life of an app is pretty short, less than 30 days according to some research, so unless your app is something truly unique and/or useful (ideally, both), it's questionable how long it will last on a user's device.

✓ Mobile websites on the other hand are always available for users to return to them.

A Mobile Website Can be an App!

✓ Just like a standard website, mobile websites can be developed as database-driven web applications that act very much like native apps.

✓ A mobile web application can be a practical alternative to native app development.

Time and Cost - Mobile Websites are Easier and Less Expensive

✓ Last but certainly not least, mobile website development is considerably more time and cost-effective than development of a native app, especially if you need to have a presence on different platforms (requiring development of multiple apps).

Support and Maintenance

✓ The investment considerations of app vs website don't end with the initial launch; properly supporting and maintaining an app (upgrades, testing, compatibility issues and ongoing development) is more much more expensive and involved than supporting a website over time.

When Does an App Make Sense?

Despite the many inherent benefits of the mobile web, apps are still very popular, and there are a number of specific use scenarios where an app will be your best choice. Generally speaking, if you need one of the following, an app makes sense:

- **Interactivity/Gaming** – for highly interactive games (think Angry Birds) an app is likely going to be your best choice, at least for the foreseeable future. For simpler games (e.g. puzzles and such) there may be less of a difference in terms of user experience with a browser-based version vs. a native app.

- **Regular Usage/Personalization** – If your target users are going to be using your app in a personalized fashion on a regular basis (think EverNote, Facebook, online Banking) then a native app provides a great way to do that that is easily accessible in almost all scenarios.

- **Complex Calculations or Reporting with Visualization** – If you need something that will take data and allow you to manipulate it with complex calculations, charts or reports (think financial or scientific tools) an app will help you do that very effectively.

- **Native Functionality or Processing Required** - Mobile web browsers are getting increasingly good at accessing certain mobile-specific functions such as click-to-call, SMS, device libraries and GPS functions. However, if you need to access a user's camera or processing power an app will still do that much more effectively.

- **Push Notifications** - An inherent capability of apps is the ability to send push notifications to users who have the app installed on their device, giving app publishers the ability to send messaging to users directly. The of course assumes the user has allowed the app to send push notifications in their settings (not everyone does). Also interesting to note is that many browsers now allow web-based push notifications, allowing website owners to similarly send notifications to visitors who opt-in on both desktop and compatible mobile devices.

- **No Connection Required** – If you need to provide offline access to content or perform functions without a network/wireless connection then an app makes sense, as you can store the data locally and then have it upload once a connection is established.

As with any project, when developing an app you want to ensure that you are getting an optimal return on your investment. What you want to avoid at all costs is the needless and expensive exercise of building an app to do something basic that can be achieved with a mobile website.

In Conclusion

As mobile use continues to grow worldwide, the "app vs web" question will remain a very real consideration for organizations seeking to establish a mobile presence. If your mobile goals are primarily marketing-driven, or if your aim is to deliver content and establish a broad mobile presence that can be easily maintained, shared between users, and found on search engines, then the a mobile-friendly [responsive website](#) is the logical choice.

On the other hand, if your goal is to provide a user experience that feels more like a gaming interface or a computer program than a website, or if you need access to a user's phone storage and native functions, then an app is probably going to be required.

It's also important to remember that a mobile/responsive website and a native app are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Plenty of organizations have both a mobile-friendly public website for their general web presence, as well as a downloadable native app to accommodate more specific requirements. In the end, it's all about choosing the right tool for the job.