

SEVEN HARD QUESTIONS *asked by* MOBILE DEVELOPERS



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When we started building VendorStack last summer, we knew that we could be an important resource for [founders, executives, product managers, and engineers](#) on vendors that solve their biggest pain points. With that in mind, we released the “[Top 50 Vendors Used by Startups](#)” last October at our private beta launch. For our open beta launch, we are releasing VendorStack’s second infographic, “[Seven Hard Questions Asked by Mobile Developers](#).”

We interviewed 27 founders, developers, and vendors to identify “[Seven Hard Questions Asked by Mobile Developers](#).” as they scale their apps and arrived at the vendors who solve these pain points.

1. HOW DO I GET MY APP TO RANK HIGHER ON THE APP STORES?

Vendors Mentioned: [App Annie](#), [appFigures](#), [Apptamin](#), [MobileDevHQ](#), [Mopapp](#), [Searchman](#)

Like search engine optimization, app store optimization (ASO) can help you organically acquire more users onto your app store profile. There are a few vendors that help you better position your app in the app store and on the web.

Most developers we talked to didn’t naturally bring up ASO but when asked, realized they under-executed in this area. As a starter, both [Searchman](#) and [MobileDevHQ](#) provide two good tutorials on ASO best practices. The key is to think of ASO as SEO and focus on some key levers in your description to get better app discovery results: app name (words and length), key words in the description, and good screenshots. But ASO is now going beyond just focusing on your app store profile.

Ian Sefferman, CEO & Co-Founder from [MobileDevHQ](#) says:

“We work with the largest app publishers and marketers. Amongst these sophisticated marketers, we’re witnessing a change around app store optimization and inbound app marketing. These app marketers increasingly realize that paid app marketing leads to very high cost, unprofitable users -- and they need a solution. At first, these app marketers thought inbound app marketing consisted of just app store optimization and app store search, but now they recognize there are many channels (such as search, social, earned media/PR, etc.), all of which work together to drive profitable, engaged users to an app.”

There are also vendors who help you navigate the various rankings between the App Store, Google Play, and others. Services like [App Annie](#), [Mopapp](#), and [appFigures](#) can provide you detailed app store analytics to help you figure out which apps and platforms are more effective. [Apptamin](#) has a great comparison doc on the various options.

2. WHAT METRICS SHOULD I BE MEASURING ON MY APP?

Vendors Mentioned: [Flurry](#), [GameAnalytics](#), [Google Analytics](#), [Keen.io](#), [Kontagent](#), [Mixpanel](#), [Yozio](#)

As we interviewed developers on the metrics they track, the consistent messaging is that traditional “vanity” metrics (e.g., installs) are not relevant and often, misleading. User retention, user engagement per session, and average revenue per user (ARPU) are important but taken best when broken up by cohort.

Ultimately, all these metrics lead to lifetime value, which is a key performance indicator that spans across different app categories. [Flurry](#) and [Google Analytics](#) are the market leaders in mobile analytics, but [Mixpanel](#) and [Keen.io](#) are gaining traction within the startup community. Gaming app-makers prefer [Kontagent](#) and newcomer [GameAnalytics](#). [Kontagent](#) has a great speaker series on this.

Patrick Eggen from [Qualcomm Ventures](#) says:

“Unfortunately we see many mobile start-ups embrace vanity metrics which inflate and misrepresent their true performance. We extract this noise and focus on meaningful metrics, which measure a loyal, engaged, and recurring user base. Our more successful mobile app investments are led by data-driven management teams who focus on real indicators of value as opposed to “empty calorie” metrics.”

Another pain point for mobile developers is identifying the customer acquisition costs, particularly since the app store yields very little information about the user, particularly how the user arrived into installing your app. Newcomer [Yozio](#) helps mobile developers identify the source of the install so you can better measure channel ROI and K-factor.

3. WHAT TOOLS CAN HELP ME QA TEST QUICKLY ON ANDROID?

Vendors Mentioned: [DeviceAnywhere](#), [Perfecto Mobile](#), [Testdroid](#)

For some of our developers, Android testing is not an issue because 1. they haven’t built an Android app or 2. they lack the resources to adequately test their app across multiple Android devices so they choose the most popular form factors. For larger app developers or companies that deal with a wider user base, having an app perform as well on a Galaxy S3 as a low-end Android phone is critical for user retention and satisfaction. Check out market leaders [DeviceAnywhere](#) and [Perfecto Mobile](#), but also newcomer [Testdroid](#).

Jeff Chen, head of business development at [MShift](#) says:

“MShift offers mobile banking solutions to banks and credit unions across the entire US. As such, we’ve had to take a broad strokes approach to Android support. The key is to maintain high visibility with your customers/end users on which Android platforms you support. Thankfully, Google publishes OS and device metrics regularly and we base our support off that. Once you have a punch-list of devices and OSes, vendors like DeviceAnywhere are very useful in getting you remote access to the device.”

4. HOW DO I GET OUR USERS TO RATE MY APP?

Vendors Mentioned: [Apptentive](#), [Helpshift](#), [UserVoice](#)

High ratings are a strong leading indicator of organic installs. But how you ask your users to rate and review your app is important. Vendors who provide great mobile customer service include [Apptentive](#), [Helpshift](#), and [UserVoice](#). Each vendor provides tools to better communicate with users, particularly when things don't go according to plan. The trick to good customer engagement is to create a fluid experience with the app so the user isn't distracted from the experience.

Most users will unlikely rate an app right away. [Apptentive](#), for example, triggers in-app feedback and surveys after certain user actions because an engaged user is more likely to be responsive to a rating request than one who isn't using the app frequently. Check out their [blog](#) on this.

Robi Ganguly, CEO & Co-Founder from [Apptentive](#), says:

"The first step is realizing that many of your customers aren't ready to rate or review your app. Great ratings and reviews are the result of delivering an excellent app and delightful experience. So, focus on determining how your customers feel about your app first. We find that this approach enables companies to better understand their customers and then, by making it easy for those who love their app to go rate, they end up with great reviews and ratings."

WHAT IS THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INCENTIVIZED INSTALLS?

Vendors Mentioned: [Appia](#), [AdMob](#), [Fiksu](#), [iAd](#), [Tapjoy](#)

The incentivized install ("incent") is one tool for mobile developers to get installs from ad networks like [Tapjoy](#). We talked to multiple developers and vendors and asked them about incents vs. non-incents vs. organic. A few key insights emerged:

1. The cost of acquisition for incents vs. non-incents is dependent on the platform, app vertical, etc. But directionally, incents are less costly than non-incents and require less upfront investment and resources to get started with. Each incentive and non-incentive install counts equally in terms of iOS App Store rank improvement.
2. The lifetime value for incents vs. non-incents vs. organic is also the same directionally. Incents are lower in value than non-incents and both have significantly less value on average than organics.
3. However, the value of any install on the App Store is equitable. This means while an incentive is lower in LTV, any given investment in incents typically has greater leverage on App Store rankings than non-incents because the lower cost of incents allows you to buy more total installs. As the App Store heavily weighs download velocity, a well timed incentive campaign can lead to strong organic install generation during and after the paid campaign.

With all these options, it's hard to differentiate the ROI for competitive ad networks like [Apple iAd](#), [Google AdMob](#) and [Appia](#) and the incentivized sources mentioned above.

Craig Pilli, VP of Business Development at [Fiksu](#), explains:

"To effectively optimize mobile advertising, marketers must collect and compare all cost and LTV data by source with an understanding of each source's impact on rank and incremental organics. Such optimization efforts require an investment in building in-house infrastructures or the outsourcing of such efforts to a partner like Fiksu."

For a fun infographic about mobile users, take a look at the latest from [Tapjoy](#).

WHO DO YOU USE FOR CRASH REPORTING?

Vendors Mentioned: [BugSense](#), [Crashlytics](#), [Critttercism](#), [Testflight](#)

We interviewed dozens of mobile developers and almost all of them used [Testflight](#) at some point in their development. For quick over-the-air beta testing, [Testflight's](#) free service lets iOS developers deploy quickly. However, as you start scaling into thousands and millions of users some of our developers have considered the three market leaders in mobile crash reporting: [BugSense](#), [Crashlytics](#) and [Critttercism](#).

Interestingly, the majority of users we talked to found the third party tools lacking so they all built their own crash reporting tools. We admit that some of these app developers started building apps 3-4 years ago, before some of the vendors were mainstream.

But the value of third party tools for crash reporting shouldn't be understated, particularly as more apps are delivered across multiple operating system releases, devices, app version updates, networks and connectivity. Twitter's recent acquisition of [Crashlytics](#) is a strong indicator of the importance of identifying edge case bugs, particularly if you consider the number of variables that enable a tweet from a mobile device somewhere in the world.

[Critttercism](#), another leading vendor in what they call app performance management, is also a true believer. Since launch, they've analyzed over 420 million devices and 30 billion app launches.

Andrew Levy, Co-Founder and CEO at [Critttercism](#) elaborates:

"We have customers ranging from indie developers to large global publishers. Having this ubiquity is important because as apps scale globally across all mobile platforms and devices, you need a vendor that can monitor not only the glaring coding mistakes but the edge cases."

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW BEFORE I DEVELOP ON A BACKEND-AS-A-SERVICE?

Vendors Mentioned: [Parse](#), [StackMob](#), [Urban Airship](#)

For developers who are looking to iterate quickly and scale across multiple platforms, using a backend-as-a-service (BaaS) vendor can be a good choice. Vendors like [Urban Airship](#), [Parse](#), and [StackMob](#) provide ready-made tools for push notification, data analytics, social integration and development environments. Larger companies may use mobile enterprise application platforms (MEAP), as coined by Gartner but none of our users considered them.

Almost all the users who used a BaaS started there through push, particularly [Urban Airship](#). Of the handful of users we talked to that had scaled apps to millions of users, they all eventually built their own solution. Clearly, issues like scale become a consideration. Others were also concerned about being "locked-in" with a singular provider. Having a vendor that doesn't lock you into a walled garden development environment is critical.

We asked Steve Gershik from [StackMob](#) what he tells his customers when they adopt [StackMob](#):

"When considering a BaaS provider, there are three key factors to include in your research: is their platform open, will it be flexible enough to meet your needs and scalable to grow with your app."

An open platform allows developers to grow and extend their app quickly without being at the whim of the providers' development schedule. StackMob gives all customers the ability to write custom server code to build their apps as they see fit. Our open and documented API enables customers to create custom SDKs as well as revise our native SDKs as their needs require."

Some BaaS providers are great for prototyping your app, but when you're considering a backend solution that will scale, Prototyping backend providers typically charge to use their API, becoming increasingly expensive as API calls and users increase. When considering a BaaS, StackMob offers its core API for free, so there is no "success tax" as you grow."

VENDORS MENTIONED (sorted by taxonomy then alphabetically)

OPTIMIZATION

App Annie
appFigures
Apptamin
MobileDevHQ
Mopapp
Searchman

ANALYTICS

Flurry
GameAnalytics
Google Analytics
Keen.io
Kontagent
Mixpanel
Yozio

QA TESTING

DeviceAnywhere
Perfecto Mobile
Testdroid

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Apptentive
Helpshift
UserVoice

APP MONETIZATION

Appia
AdMob
Fiksu
iAd
Tapjoy

CRASH REPORTING

BugSense
Crashlytics
Critticism
Testflight

BACKEND-AS-A-SERVICE

Parse
StackMob
Urban Airship

VendorStack would like to thank the executives from the following companies for participating in our survey over the past few months.

Airbrite
Apptentive
Critticism
Fiksu
Gratafy
Helpshift
Intro
Klamr
LOLApps

MobileDevHQ
Motion Math
Mshift
MunkyFun
PingmeGram
Qualcomm Ventures
REConnect
Salsamobi
Stackmob

Swiftkey
Tapfame
TapGreet
Tapjoy
Third Track
Upstart Mobile
UserVoice
Yozio
Zynga

In addition, we would like to thank our designer Janice Kim (janice-kim.com) for designing the cool infographic.

As with the last infographic, here are some disclaimers:

COMMERCIALY-ORIENTED

We realized very quickly that some of the hardest questions asked by mobile developers had nothing to do with their vendors. For example, I cannot tell you how many times people were frustrated by the app store approval process. The point of this infographic was to identify third-party vendors that could solve problems you would otherwise have to build in-house or do by scratch.

FOREST FOR TREES

We took a wide brush to all the problems that plagued mobile developers. In future infographics and reports, we may focus more on one particular sub-topic. For example, every developer we talked to had multiple questions and opinions about monetization. To do the monetization question justice, for example, we would have to spend more than one question and just a few vendor examples because the ecosystem is huge. We'll save it for next time.

VENDOR IMPARTIALITY

We asked some vendors to articulate where they provide the biggest value to their customers. Our request was that each quote was given with the end user in mind and to try not to be too commercial. We realize that by highlighting certain vendors over others, we are giving some preferential treatment even when that is not our intent. If you're a vendor who would like to be showcased in future reports, contact us at vendors@vendorstack.com and we'll get back to you shortly. Thanks!