Book Mobilize

Strategies for Success from the Frontlines of the App Revolution

Rana June Sobhany
Vanguard Press, 2011
Listen now

- play
- pause

00:00
00:00

Recommendation

No offense to app developers, but they're not the most marketing savvy bunch. That's OK because now there's a book for that. Mobile marketing specialist Rana June Sobhany stresses that building a killer app comes first; selling it by applying solid marketing principles comes second. Apple's App Store is less than three years old, and app developers have the tricky task of marketing in a new, evolving medium. Sobhany – who has been on the frontlines since the beginning – helpfully draws on her own experiences to create a roadmap to success. She also provides firsthand, useful accounts from bloggers, tech journalists and, especially, successful app developers themselves. And, she supplies worksheet templates for positioning, strategic planning, publicity and metrics. *BooksInShort* recommends this excellent resource to developers, designers and marketers poised to enter the app frontier.

Take-Aways

- Apple's App Store opened in July 2008 to immediate, remarkable success.
- Building a well-designed app is step one. Marketing it is step two.
- The App Store is a "closed platform," giving Apple quality and design control over apps for the iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad.
- The iPhone launched a new, exciting generation of mobile phone games.
- Software developers can apply established marketing methods to mobile platforms.
- Positioning is the first step in creating a marketing strategy.
- Branding, timing, pricing and engagement are essential in mobile app marketing.
- Unpaid coverage from bloggers, reviewers, social media and tech reporters is "earned media."
- Many developers with limited budgets handle their own publicity and garner plenty of coverage.
- Smart phones offer highly individualized and accurate usage data.

Summary

Selling Apps by the Peck

Apple's App Store opened on July 10, 2008. Users downloaded applications ten million times during the first weekend, outperforming everyone's expectations. Before the online App Store opened, developers had to work with mobile carriers to distribute their mobile device applications. This often was a long, arduous process, with the carriers wielding all the power. Independent developers had to share as much as 50% of their revenue with the carriers, pay large up-front fees and invest heavily in marketing. The App Store removed mobile carriers from the equation and made releasing applications much easier and more economical for developers.

"Something is changing in the media world, and big players and heavy hitters are taking notice and making moves."

Apple runs a "closed platform," meaning it has complete control over the development and distribution of its mobile applications, thus ensuring that every app's quality and design meets the company's high standards. Although some developers complain about the approval process, overall the high-quality level of most apps reflects well on Apple.

"The stars have aligned. This is not a fad – this is a paradigm shift."

By its first anniversary in 2009, the App Store tallied 1.5 billion downloads. Of the first 500 applications designed for the iPhone and iPod Touch, the App Store released 125 for free. By June 2010, the store offered 300,000 apps to the world's 70 million iPhone and iPod Touch users. By then, more than 300,000 developers were participating in the iPhone Developer Program, justifying Apple CEO Steve Jobs's belief in allowing independent developers to design software for Apple hardware. He wanted to create a vehicle that gave independent developers tinkering on their computers the same opportunity as major game manufacturers and software companies.

"We use our iPhones to find out what song is being played on the radio, check sports scores and stock prices, buy movie tickets, and remotely access our desktop computers and servers."

Jobs decided to let the market dictate appropriate app prices, making pricing a challenge for developers. Although the 25% of downloads offered for free generate 75% of the store's traffic, users also purchase millions of applications weekly. The developer's bottom line is to create a high-quality, mind-blowing app and price it appropriately. Developers are experimenting with free trial offers or "lite" versions of an app to entice people to try it, fall in love with it and make a purchase. The App Store is relatively new and continuously evolving, but precedent already has established some best practices for marketing your app:

1. **"Remember the Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility"** – As any economist would explain, your app is as valuable as what users are willing to pay for it. Price often affects perceived value, so you may want to set a higher fee.
2. **"Don't spam...unless it's helpful"** – "Spamming" is when developers attempt to get around the system by loading the store up with "lightweight," low-content apps. Apple will find out and eradicate this type of behavior.
3. **"Avoid update fatigue"** – Many developers refresh their apps and gain new sales with updates. Originally, you could re-enter Apple's "What's New" list with an update, but Apple has put a stop to that. Don't burn out users with too many updates.
4. **"Don't necessarily blame Apple when things go wrong"** – If you are at all familiar with the popular saying, "Don't bite the hand that feeds you," you understand why Apple bashing is not in your best interest, regardless of any flaws in the system.

Serious Games

The introduction of the iPhone seriously affected mobile phone gaming, the App Store's largest category. At first, developers wondered if mobile games could compete with console devices and handheld vehicles such as the Nintendo DS and Sony PSP. Yet the iPhone opened the door to a new, exciting generation of mobile phone games that could take advantage of such features as "geolocation, Internet connectivity, Bluetooth and touchscreen inputs." Moreover, as hardware technology continues to improve, memory and graphics also will improve, giving iPhones even greater capacity to compete. Gaming giants such as Electronic Arts and Gameloft are now developing games for the iPhone platform. The arrival of the iPad, with its larger screen and increased resolution, will hasten the game development process.

Know Your App

Although mobile apps are new, software developers can apply some tried-and-true marketing methods to mobile platforms. Make marketing part of the process when you begin creating your app. Base your program on correct positioning. As ad experts Al Ries and Jack Trout explain, positioning is "an organized system for finding a window in the mind. It is based on the concept that communication can only take place at the right time and under the right circumstances."

"The iPhone has single-handedly caused an evolution in gaming, and consumers are hooked."

Understand who your app's audience is, how they will use it and why they will love it. Define the app's purpose and the solution it provides. Will it help users become more efficient or organized? Will it provide entertainment or functionality? Which category does it fit? For example, a music trivia game could go in either the music or games group. Construct a marketing strategy that will garner "mind share" by "placing a product or idea in a potential customer's mind." When buyers become aware of your app, you've taken a major step in establishing your brand.

"The advent of the iPad is just going to accelerate the development that's already occurring."

Keywords that describe the essence of your product are pivotal in getting results when customers conduct an Internet search. The App Store also has a keyword system. You can use up to 255 characters for keywords that are embedded in your app's metadata. Choose keywords in light of how buyers will search for your app. If you provide a solution, cite it in the app's title. "TP Buddy" is clever, but "TP Buddy-the Incredible Toilet Paper Tracker Utility" is more searchable.

"There's absolutely no risk to a consumer to read a description online, click a button and install an application."

Once you are clear about your role in the app market, create a "positioning statement" to guide all your marketing messages and clarify your goals and vision to your employees and customers. For example, Google's positioning statement says, "Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." Clearly communicating your app's merits influences and directs your stakeholders' perception of your brand and keeps your message consistent.

Reaching Out

Develop your marketing plan based on having confidence in your app, setting a suitable price and following a long-range plan. As you proceed, "solicit feedback," set a schedule and adhere to it, study your rivals in the field, decide whether to advertise, and then "execute, execute, execute." Building a well-designed, awesome app is

the heart of this business. *Wired* writer Brian X. Chen explains, "Long story short, the number one thing you need to be successful in the App Store is an intrinsically interesting idea and the brains to code it." Once you have a product that you are passionate about, you can craft your positioning statement and develop your brand. Consumers' perception of your brand begins the first time they see your app's icon, so molding your brand's image via logos, icons, design and communications is crucial to your marketing. Paying attention to all aspects of the branding progression is vital to creating an enduring name.

> "Apple has gotten smarter about the App Store, but the App Store still isn't perfect."

Your customers are a tremendous resource. Reach out to them and listen to their suggestions. Bryan Duke of Acceleroto says his company changed its Air Hockey app because, he says, "I listened to my customers: "The feedback from my first version...went something like 'good, but I really need something I can play when I'm standing in line at the store'." Given this feedback, Duke created a one-player version of the game that became immensely popular.

> "Marketing an iPhone app is like climbing a hill – a really steep hill. The climb up is very difficult, but once you've hit the top it's smooth sailing – until you're at the bottom again."

Timing is also critical. Success in apps often comes in fits and starts, rather than as a steady growth curve. Using timing to your advantage will boost sales. For instance, customers purchase certain types of apps around holidays; others are popular at the beginning of the school year or in the summer. The advent of new technologies also creates fresh opportunities for app launches. However, with 300,000-plus apps out there, you're likely to have multiple rivals. Use a SWOT analysis of your and your competitors' "strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats" to determine where you stand, uncover possibilities and identify areas that need work. This planning tool will help you create tactics to promote your app and differentiate your brand.

> "The better and more concisely you can sell your idea, the more likely it is for that message to stick."

Early app developers played around with pricing to achieve sales volume. They cut prices to build awareness and sales. However, the 99-cent price is not always advantageous or sustainable. People will pay more for apps they're excited about, so price your app appropriately, and build price into your marketing strategy.

> "Be courageous with your positioning because to be timid is to appear ordinary."

The best possible boost is to have Apple recognize and promote your app. However, becoming one of the chosen ones is a tricky, elusive business. Jason Jacobs of Runkeeper explains, "Our big break was when Apple starting featuring us in full-page newspaper ads." But, he adds, "The best way to get featured by Apple – from what I can see – is to not focus on getting Apple's attention at all. Rather, focus on building a great app that is solid, design up to Apple design standards [and draw] a large community of happy users." AteBits founder Loren Brichter agrees: "Having a popular app certainly gets Apple's attention...I'm not sure if there's any magic to it, but it's always helpful to remember that you're dealing with really caring, dedicated people over there who are still working out the kinks in this crazy, amazing new system."

"Earned" and "Paid"

You can promote your apps by using two types of advertising. "Earned media" is coverage you don't pay for from bloggers, reviewers, social media and the like. "Paid media" refers to all the activities for which you pay a fee, such as advertising and sponsorships. A solid marketing strategy uses both earned and paid media. You can hire a public relations specialist to spread the word about your app, though many small developers with limited budgets do very well handling their own publicity. When deciding where to focus your PR efforts, consider your audience and what vehicles you can use to reach them with information about your app's best features. Some app developers blog about their products, while others seek placements in industry publications, blogs and websites. Outlets that are especially relevant for app promotion include, Pocket Gamer, Cacrumors, 148apps, AppleInsider, TUAW and App Craver. Websites include Wired, Daring Fireball, Macworld, Ars Technica, Engadget and Gizmodo.

> "We're all just learning the best way to create hit applications that garner replicable and predictable success."

When publicizing your app, make your story interesting. Give reporters relevant, exciting news to cover. Keep your press releases brief. Reporters who are inundated with developers' releases won't wade through long, verbose materials. Press kits should include pictures, videos, brief descriptions and biographies. Becoming social-media savvy is essential because app users love to talk about their favorites on blogs and forums, like Facebook and Twitter, which are low-cost conduits that give your products a lot of exposure. Provide a place where fans can promote your app. Jacobs says Runkeeper's "user forum is an incredibly vibrant place, where users give us tons of feedback...and many of them help maintain the forum and answer questions for others."
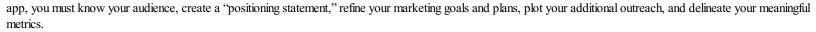
How Are You Doing?

With the advent of smartphones, developers can track how many people use their apps. This data is highly individualized and accurate. Important app metrics include:

- **"Length of engagement"** – How much time users spend with an application.
- **"Focused engagement"** – How much time users spend on each screen.
- **"User preference"** – Where users prefer to spend their time on an app, derived from comparing length of engagement to focused engagement.
- **"Click-though rate"** – How many people see a link versus how many click on it.
- **"Conversions"** – How many people download an app versus how many use it.
- **"Decay"** – How often people use an app over time.

> "In a nascent market, the only thing you can control is how hard you're willing to fight to sell your apps."

Developers can use metrics to plan their outreach strategies. James Keller of User Experience and Strategy explains, "Metrics are critical when marketing, because without them it is impossible to know if your time [or] money is being well spent. Solid metrics that are revisited on a regular basis will help you evaluate your activities and make better decisions." Marketing never ends. It is a cycle of creating strategy, implementing the plan, evaluating the results and making changes. To market your

app, you must know your audience, create a "positioning statement," refine your marketing goals and plans, plot your additional outreach, and delineate your meaningful metrics.

About the Author

App marketing expert **Rana June Sobhany** is cofounder of Medialets, a mobile analytics firm. A "student of jazz guitar and audio engineering," she is the "first iPad DJ."