WHAT MOBILE APPS CAN DO FOR YOUR BUSINESS

They have a lot to offer, especially for growing businesses. With thousands of free and low-cost off-the-shelf offerings and DIY platforms for building your own, now is the right time to develop a mobile-app strategy that meets your business needs.
As mobile apps become increasingly important to all companies, it’s time to plan how they can help your company better connect with customers.

Most modern businesses would barely be able to function without computers. But a computer is nothing more than a conglomeration of circuit boards, diodes, and other electronic parts. Software programs make the hardware useful, especially programs that meet specific business needs such as accounting, marketing, and supply chain management. Similarly, a smartphone or tablet without the right apps to help you meet your business objectives is about as useful as a computer loaded with nothing but games. Apps are basically scaled-down software programs for the tiny computers most business owners now carry in their pockets or bags. And whether you buy them off-the-shelf, build them yourself, or hire someone else to do it for you, apps are essential to maximizing the benefits mobile technology has to offer.

As with most tech-related business decisions these days, Internet access, bandwidth, scalability, and flexibility are important considerations you should factor into any mobile-app strategy, regardless of whether the app is bought, built, or contracted out. Joel Warburton, senior manager, data product management at Comcast Business, stresses that this should be done very early in the process. “Bandwidth is going to be a critical consideration throughout this process. If it’s a customer-facing app used for remote ordering, loyalty programs, marketing plans, and the like, it’s probably going to require a lot of bandwidth,” he says. “If you are building the app yourself or having a contractor do it, there are additional bandwidth issues involved. During the development and testing stages, for example, you’ll likely be sending very large files...
back and forth to your developer, or internally if you’re building it in house. Everyone is looking for the next killer app, but you have to keep in mind that the more popular an app is, the more bandwidth it’s going to need. So bandwidth size, reliability, flexibility, and scalability are important considerations."

**SMARTPHONE USAGE ON THE RISE**

Ownership and usage of smartphones and other mobile devices have exploded among both consumers and the businesses pursuing them. Richard Rabins, CEO of Alpha Software Corporation, cites research showing that the number of companies using smartphones for business purposes has more than doubled during the past five years, and three-quarters of business owners say mobile technology is important to their future success. “The question is no longer whether your business should jump on the bandwagon, but rather how,” Rabins declares.

Rabins’s enthusiasm is echoed in many quarters, including mobile app proponents, who cite the technology’s potential to help businesses strengthen their relationships with customers, suppliers, and other strategic partners. Mobile apps can magnify your ability to connect with customers, making it possible to deliver product and service information, customer service help, marketing offers, and more to targeted customers and prospects in a timely fashion. “An app on your customer’s—or potential customer’s—home screen is the most important real estate any business can hope to occupy,” says David Eads, founder and CEO of Mobile Strategy Partners LLC.

The right mobile app can transform how companies work and how they interact with their customers, says Alex Bratton, CEO and chief geek at Lextech Global Services. Mobile apps can make processes more efficient, reduce paperwork, and drive collaboration. They can increase revenue and profitability, enhance communication, and decrease employee turnover. “The key is to first determine your pain points and evaluate if mobile can help overcome those challenges,” he suggests.

**OPPORTUNITY AREAS FOR GROWING BUSINESSES**

All kinds of businesses, especially growing ones, are putting mobile apps to many different uses, says Tehsin Bhayani, co-founder and CEO of Serind Labs, including:

- **Offering on-demand services** to customers via the convenience of a simple tap on the app.
- **Allowing service contractors to keep track** of their time and location while on the road, and to record customer signatures digitally.
- **Offering real-time deals** to their customers based on both location, (i.e., only when those customers are in the neighborhood) and personalization, using data such as previous transaction history and data gathered from other sources, such as social media profiles.
• Creating scalable loyalty programs for existing customers and leveraging the app to find new customers. “For example, some companies are offering deals through their loyalty apps that reward existing customers for referrals,” Bhayani explains. Existing customers might get $10 coupons as a referral fee, and the customers they refer also get $10 off their first purchase.

The list of things for which businesses can use mobile apps is constantly evolving, driven by the massive growth in smartphone penetration among both consumers and vendors, the growing number of off-the-shelf apps now available, the relative ease of do-it-yourself development for simple apps, and technological advances such as the declining cost of sensors tied to various physical elements. For example, the cost of sensors that track customers as they enter retail locations and wireless payment systems now puts them within reach of many more businesses, Bhayani says.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT TYPE OF APP

The starting point for choosing an app is determining what business need it might meet or what opportunity it might create. Bratton’s book, Billion Dollar Apps: How to Find and Implement a Winning Mobile Strategy explores the subject, and he is passionate about this part of the process. He suggests a stepped approach:

1. Outline the business opportunity. Start by white-boarding your business strategies and goals for the year, (e.g., increase revenue, improve margins, reduce customer churn, etc.)

2. Identify how you will get there. Highlight one or more workflows for each goal. For example, if one of your goals is to boost sales by 10 percent for the year, list all the workflows you might use to make that happen: lead generation, catalog creation, face-to-face sales, order fulfillment, etc.

3. Know the roadblocks. Identify all obstacles preventing optimal functionality of those workflows (paper order forms, manual data entry into CRM systems, lack of remote functionality for routine processes, etc.)

4. Apply mobile apps. Looking at the roadblocks, envision ways you can apply mobile apps to neutralize them. For example, a searchable catalog on a tablet might reduce the time sales reps spend writing orders; an app that generates price quotes might alleviate order-entry mistakes and speed up fulfillment.

5. Score the apps. Calculate the value each app might provide to your business—increased productivity, additional revenue, higher profits, etc.—to determine potential ROA (return on app).

6. Assess other criteria. These are specific to each business but often include such items as the cost of implementing an app, the scope of increased demand it will put on existing IT resources and personnel, and how widespread adoption of the app is likely to be.

Business owners should ask themselves a straightforward question: Do I want my brand, products, and services in the pocket of my customers so they can engage with me any time of the day?
At the outset of developing a mobile-app strategy, business owners should ask themselves a straightforward question: Do I want my brand, products, and services in the pocket of my customers so they can engage with me any time of the day? “That might sound a little facetious, but any organization needs to understand the ultimate prize at the end of the process,” Eads says. A wide variety of questions need to be answered by the business owner and/or a trusted advisor to help determine whether an app makes sense. What problem(s) are you trying to solve? Is an app the best solution relative to other alternatives? How will an app align with your overall long-term business and digital strategies?

It’s important to start with a clear definition of the customer or prospect the app will be targeting and what it is meant to accomplish. “Many businesses serve very different markets simultaneously,” Eads explains. “For example, it may make sense for the same business to adopt a B2B app for key strategic partners, but not a B2C app. Or, it may make sense to buy or create an app focused on internal ‘customers,’ say a mobile workforce, to solve some of its problems.”

**DIFFERENT PATHS TO MOBILE-APP ADOPTION**

With all mobile apps have to offer, it’s not surprising that their usage is nearly universal among enterprise-size organizations; what is surprising is that adoption has been slow to trickle down to smaller businesses. Among the latter, 78 percent of respondents in a 2015 survey by Endurance International Group reported not yet having a mobile app or solution, even though 71 percent saw potential for a positive impact on their business.

Given the hundreds of free and low-cost mobile apps targeting a wide span of business needs currently available, that gap should be easy to close. Businesses can choose from a broad selection of plug-and-play apps in areas such as communication, time management, payment, recordkeeping, organization, and collaboration, such as:

- **RECEIPTBANK**, a free subscription-based app that lets you snap photos of receipts and send them to your account. Then you can log in online, review your receipts, and download expense reports.
- **DOCU SIGN**, which enables you to use a smartphone to sign documents, receive digital signatures, and forward them via the Web.
- **TRIP IT**, a handy travel organizer that keeps users connected to online accounts; tracks travel bookings and confirmations, collates itineraries, and adds relevant information about delays, special offers, etc.
- **MY ND**, which keeps track of the times and locations of all your meetings and events and tells you when to set off for them, based on your current location and local traffic conditions, so you won’t be late.
If you can’t find what you want, do-it-yourself app-building platforms requiring little or no technical expertise put customized solutions within easy reach. Some popular app-building solutions include:

- **Salesforce1 Platform**, a subscription-based solution which can create basic apps but provides lots of flexibility for customization.
- **Zoho Creator**, an advanced DIY app maker that makes it possible for those without technical backgrounds to build fully functional apps that can integrate third-party services such as PayPal; it’s available in both free and paid versions.
- **BuildFire**, a service that offers the option of having one of its app developers build your app—for free—as well as a full DIY option; both free and paid versions.
- **AppMakr**, a DIY app-creation platform for iOS and Android that requires no coding; free version is ad-supported, while ad-free plans start at $1 a month.
- **Appy Pie**, one of the fastest-growing DIY app-building tools, utilizes a drag-and-drop platform to build mobile apps for all major platforms (iOS, Android, Windows Phone, and BlackBerry) and automatically publishes them to their respective stores.

Contracting the whole project out is another option, of course, but it tends to get pricey very quickly. Bhayani says businesses should plan on budgeting at least $14,000 for an app custom-built by a third-party provider, but he warns that costs can be significantly higher, depending on the app’s complexity and whether you want it to run on multiple platforms.

**DIFFERENT BUDGETING CONSIDERATIONS**

No matter which path a business follows in developing and deploying a mobile-app strategy, budgeting is best done through a comprehensive approach, suggests Stephanie Trunzo, chief operating officer at PointSource. Buying or developing the app and launching it into the app stores (which are the primary means of broad distribution for all kinds of apps, free or paid) are not the only expenses involved, and she advocates creation of a comprehensive budget for a first-phase mobile strategy that considers the following costs:

- **Building a business plan**, including strategy-session consultation with mobile experts to build sound objectives and a set of performance metrics.
- **Research**, to ensure the app or apps being adopted will be usable and useful. “Without this step, nearly nothing else matters in your budget,” she warns.
- **Design and development** (if you are building an app or having one created for you), which should include consideration of which platforms will be supported; responsive Web design (RWD), installable apps or a hybrid approach; form factors, i.e., phone, tablet, watch; and software licenses.
- **Mobile launch**, which encompasses not only the cost of getting the app into
app stores (even if your app is free, there are generally costs involved when distributing it through app stores), but also the marketing and enablement costs of getting it into target users’ hands.

- **Lifecycle management**, to cover testing, defects, and maintenance (for custom-built apps); managing/updating to stay abreast of rapidly changing mobile technology; and understanding the feedback loop for realizing the benefit of this investment.

Todd Marks, CEO and co-founder of Mindgrub, says it’s important to make sure you include ongoing engineering and marketing support in your budget considerations, especially for purpose-built apps. He estimates engineering support to maintain app functionality going forward accounts for about 10 percent of most budgets for custom apps, less for off-the-shelf apps. “Ongoing marketing support is also required. Part of that marketing spend is for analysis of what features and functions your users are actually using,” he says. That feedback loop can inform your content and communication strategy and help you decide when to add new content.

“For business owners, it’s important to make a scalable investment,” Trunzo stresses. “Developed properly, a mobile-app strategy can stand the test of time and potentially be applied to multiple service applications across various aspects of your business as it grows.”

**MISTAKES TO AVOID**

Whether it’s a purchased or a custom-built app, failure to calculate its potential for engagement from the very start of the process is a sure-fire way to hamstring a mobile-app strategy, says Brent Hieggelke, chief mobile evangelist at Urban Airship. “Businesses must focus on transforming users from interested downloaders to opted-in users. We’ve coined the term ‘APPathy’ to describe how 70 percent of opt-in users abandon or delete an app within 30 days of downloading it.” Other mistakes Hieggelke sees businesses making in this area include trying to replicate websites in app form without optimizing features to be streamlined for smaller screens and on-the-go attention spans, and creating “needy” apps that send too many self-serving notifications.

Perhaps the biggest mistake businesses need to avoid when it comes to mobile app development is diving into the app store without a solid business case for being there.
In today’s technology-driven, cloud-enabled world, the vast majority of businesses rely on internet connectivity for a growing array of critical business needs. From developing and deploying mobile apps to digital marketing campaigns to better customer service and faster order fulfillment, fast, reliable, scalable bandwidth is the foundation on which many business processes rest. For CRS Technology Consultants, an IT consulting firm based in southwest Florida and serving customers nationwide, that means Comcast Business Internet.
With company headquarters located in Florida’s “Hurricane Alley,” CRS’s physical business is at risk from severe weather events for roughly half of every year. In a Comcast Business case study, its founders recognized the emergence of cloud-based services as a unique opportunity to help mitigate that risk by reducing its reliance on on-premises hardware and moving systems to the cloud. Along with greater assurance of business continuity in the event of weather-related outages, the company also stood to benefit from cost and efficiency gains resulting from cloud services.

As CRS moved more line-of-business applications to the cloud, the need for a faster, more-scalable connection to support timely access to those applications by both employees and customers became starkly apparent. Already a user of Comcast Business Internet, the company simply contacted its local sales rep and upgraded its connection to 100 Mbps. Comcast was able to add capacity quickly, without having to install new equipment or schedule a site visit. The increased bandwidth and cloud-based applications available throughout the organization help CRS ensure that everyone has central access to the same information without having to hunt it down.

“Now if we have an issue that goes on for several days or involves multiple engineers, it’s all being worked from one ticket, one central space,” says Jordi Tejero, the company owner. “Everybody has access to that. Even if it saves every employee just 10 minutes a day, the numbers add up really quickly.”

Robust broadband connectivity to support cloud-based software is also increasing productivity at CRS by limiting the amount of time its professionals have to spend on-site at clients’ facilities. They are now able to do a significant amount of work remotely by leveraging applications such as a cloud-based remote monitoring and management tool that allows them to monitor clients’ networks and connected devices. “If one of their workstations has, say, a bad block on its hard drive or a server seems about to fail, the system alerts us, and we can run diagnostics and repairs remotely,” Tejero explains.

For Tejero, the most important thing about the cloud-based capabilities 100 Mbps Comcast Business Internet enables is that they liberate his clients from worry and free them to focus on their own businesses’ core competencies. “Working in the cloud has freed us up to help our clients move their business forward,” he says. “Instead of having to spend money on fixing stuff, they are able to spend those dollars on truly forward-looking IT initiatives, such as mobile apps, that can help grow their business.”

Comcast Business, “CRS Technology Consultants Moves its Business to the Cloud with Comcast Business.”
As you look for new applications to keep your business mobile and productive, be sure to look at the many other tools available to facilitate communication and collaboration. Comcast Business helps you build the right technology and network foundation with a wide range of scalable Internet, voice, TV, and support tools and resources to help you make the most out of your communications systems. Ready to grow? See what these solutions can do for your business.
Comcast Business understands that you can’t waste precious resources troubleshooting IT issues when business is piling up.

• **Internet.** When it comes to the Internet, it’s all about speed. Comcast Business Internet offers downloads up to 150Mbps and uploads up to 20Mbps. In addition, the service offers hosted Microsoft Exchange, including Outlook email and SharePoint; flexible Web-hosting options to build and promote a website; and, for customers with more demanding data requirements, Comcast Business also offers Ethernet services.

Comcast Business Internet also includes access to two Wireless Networks, a Private WiFi network for your employees and a Public WiFi hotspot for your customers and visitors. Through the Private Network, your employees can connect wirelessly to servers and other shared devices, like printers, as well as cloud applications and the Internet. The Public WiFi hotspot is a convenience feature for your clients and can help make your business a destination.

• **Voice.** Crystal-clear phone service should be your minimum expectation, but that’s just the beginning of what Comcast Business offers. Remote access to calls and voicemail, cost-effective managed voice service, unlimited local and domestic long distance, PRI Trunk solutions, 24/7 support, and more—it’s all part of the Comcast Business Voice experience.

Looking for a managed voice solution? Comcast Business VoiceEdge lets you focus on your business instead of your business communications. With the VoiceEdge high-definition, cloud-based phone service, all voice communications services are managed by Comcast Business, which minimizes capital expenditures and eliminates the need to manage and maintain a premise-based PBX or Key System. And with features like Be Anywhere, which helps users avoid missed calls, and Remote Office, which allows users to utilize their phone number and profile features from anywhere they work, you and your people are never out of communication.

• **TV.** With Comcast Business TV, you can choose the package that best fits your needs and adds the most value for your business. Comcast Business offers content geared to offices and waiting rooms, bars and restaurants, fitness centers, and hotels. Comcast Business TV offers competitively priced packages including popular local broadcast and cable networks; news, business, general sports, weather, family, and more; and league-specific sports channels covering the NFL, MLB, NBA, and NHL.

• **Cloud Applications.** The Cloud Solutions Marketplace from Comcast Business offers several best-in-class cloud applications built for your business. The Cloud Solutions Marketplace provides solutions from such well-known providers.
as: Soonr Workplace, the leading secure online file sharing and collaboration service; hosted Microsoft Exchange from Comcast Business, with a powerful set of cloud-based productivity tools that will unlock the potential of your business; data backup from MozyPro (desktop and server), Carbonite Business, and Mozy; data security from market leaders Norton, and F-Secure; online meeting tools from Anymeeting and Cisco Webex; electronic signature tools from DocuSign and marketing tools from Swiftpage and Booker.

**Support.** You put your trust in Comcast business to deliver reliable data, voice, and TV services that consistently exceed expectations. We take that trust seriously, and know that you can’t waste precious resources troubleshooting IT issues and waiting for issues to be resolved. That’s why we offer the Comcast Business Promise: IF your service is interrupted, we promise to resolve it as quickly as possible. If you report a service interruption that was our issue, you will receive a bill credit. It’s that simple. Learn more about our promise at [business.comcast.com/about-us/promise](http://business.comcast.com/about-us/promise)
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