

To App or Not to App

Should your law firm develop a mobile website—or a platform app?

In the past few years, smartphones, tablets and other mobile devices have rapidly increased in popularity.

Nearly half of American adults (46 percent) were smartphone owners as of February 2012—an 11 percentage point increase compared to May 2011, according to data from the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

In summer 2010, just 4 percent of American adults owned tablet computers; by last October, Pew found that number had swelled to 25 percent. With the ever-growing amount of iPad, iPhone, Android, Google Nexus, Kindle Fire and other mobile device users, it's likely that some current and potential clients may be trying to view your firm's website on a portable device—which can unfortunately cause some issues.

Unless your firm created its website specifically with mobile device users in mind, chances are it was designed for someone using a desktop computer with a large monitor. Sites that were designed for desktop users often don't look the same on mobile devices. Tablet and smartphone users may not be able to access all of a site's navigational elements if they're clicking on items with their finger, instead of a mouse; mobile device users also sometimes have a hard time using drop-down menus.

There is, however, a simple solution to ensure all site visitors can access your firm's site: Create a mobile version—or provide users with a standalone app.

Mobile Website Basics

A mobile version of a website is essentially a separate, condensed version of your firm's site, created with design elements that help handheld device users see, click on and read the most important information you want to convey.

Mobile sites are particularly helpful for reaching smartphone users—who, unlike iPad and other tablet users, most likely won't be looking at your website on a large screen.



Understanding Apps

Platform apps, on the other hand, are software applications that users download to run on tablets, smartphones and similar devices. Once downloaded, they may not require an Internet connection to use, and they can store more personal information than a mobile site, providing a personalized experience.

Mobile device-optimized websites and platform apps offer a very separate set of advantages.

How can your firm determine whether it should create a mobile version of its website—or develop its own app? Consider the following suggestions:

Mobile Website User Benefits

Mobile websites enable firms to reach the widest possible audience because they can be created in a way that isn't device-specific.

Their advantages include:

- **The ability to be viewed on different screens.** Screen size varies from device to device—for example, it's considerably smaller on an iPhone than on an iPad. However, an increasingly popular method called responsive design allows websites to be automatically adjusted to fit each user's screen by detecting the device the visitor is using to access the site.

Site designers use fluid grids to allow for various image and screen sizes when establishing the site's layout.

- **The flexibility to accommodate all devices.** Mobile sites are compatible with a variety of devices and platforms. With apps, a different version must be created for Android, iOS, BlackBerry and Microsoft devices. A single mobile site, however, can function on all devices. Also, unlike platform apps, mobile websites don't necessarily need to be updated as new devices enter the market. For example, when Apple launched the iPhone 5, many app developers had to update their iOS platform app to fit the new device's larger screen.

- **The chance to provide your audience with immediate updates.** Adding content to a mobile website is an easy process. Once alterations are made, any user with an Internet connection can access the new information—making it an ideal way to share industry updates, upcoming deadlines, news and other time-sensitive items.

With mobile websites, firms retain control of the update process. Outdated content can be removed or changed to provide the user with the latest possible information. Apps involve a different process. Users are required to periodically download any updates—if they don't, you have no way of ensuring they're viewing the most up-to-date information.

- **Enhanced promotional opportunities.** The content on a mobile website can also help enhance your search engine optimization (SEO).

Among other things, the number of times keywords appear on a webpage is one of the top items Google has said its search algorithms look for—which is why whitepapers, blog posts and other content that's peppered with legal terms can help a firm's website appear more frequently when users search for related keywords.

Mobile websites also make sharing content easy. With the click of a button, users can post items from your site to social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, e-mail content or text a portion to a friend. That extra shareability factor can provide a big pay-off for firms that are trying to build and promote their brand.

- **Fewer hurdles for users.** Finding your firm is much easier on a mobile website. Users can gain instant access to your content, attorneys, contact information and more when searching for your site on the Web. This is especially important for first-time users who may not have the patience—or desire—to download and install an app in order to find the information for which they are searching.

The process of keeping platform apps up to date can also be quite taxing for users as it requires syncing and downloading each new update. As the updating of mobile websites falls on the firm, they are always up to date when they reach the visitor. This means serious (and minor) bugs can be fixed immediately, sparing people of potential user experience issues.

- **A lower investment than you may think.** Building a mobile website is often less time intensive than firms expect. Because they are created to highlight the most important firm information, mobile sites often contain less content and overall pages than a firm's full site.

Mobile sites should also take less time to produce. Deploying a mobile version of a website can be done in a matter of weeks—which should help keep cost at a reasonable level.

Eliminating promotional costs will also keep your investment low. Mobile websites don't need the publicity that platform apps require. As I mentioned before, users must essentially jump a hurdle to install a platform app, but they won't be jumping if they don't know it's there. Significant promotion must be done to make users aware your app exists.

App User Benefits

Apps have an undeniable "coolness factor," and they're often easy to figure out—they scored higher in usability than mobile device websites, according to a recent Nielsen Norman Group report.

They're also a hit with the smartphone crowd: From 2011 to 2012, the average number of apps per phone

continued

grew 28 percent—from 32 to 41 apps, according to Nielsen.

However, although apps may be fun to use, they're not an automatic fit for every firm. Before you decide to create your own app, ask yourself:

- **Would your users benefit from accessing information offline?** For example, if you know certain key clients travel frequently and will be accessing information about your firm in Internet-free zones, such as planes, an app may offer an advantage. Like Amazon's Kindle e-reader, apps allow users to access information that's housed on their mobile device—instead of having to rely on a slow or unavailable Internet connection.
- **Do you plan to offer specific functionality?** The ability to perform complex data processing and calculations is one of platform apps' biggest selling points. If your firm works with a certain client base on a regular basis that would benefit from significant processing functionality, such as the ability to perform high complexity searches, you may benefit from creating an app. Apps with a calculation functionality can also prove useful to your firm's clients. For example, franchisees might be interested in an app that helps them estimate royalty fees or other business expenses.



However, if your offering is not primarily about functionality, and instead is more content-focused, you should – and may need to – stick to a mobile website. Many platform apps must undergo an approval process. For example, in order to be listed in Apple's App Store, your platform app must provide more functionality than would be available on a mobile site, or you risk being denied approval.

- **How could you personalize each user's experience?** Apps can help firms address a very defined audience. Real estate apps like Zillow work on that principle; you key in the perimeters of where you want to live, your desired price and number of bedrooms, and the information will be stored for continuous use so that you don't have to re-enter it each time you search.

Law firms may benefit from creating recruiting apps that law students can download if they're interested in learning more about the firm, or apps designed to promote a firm-sponsored event—offering quick, handy access to the schedule, speaker bios and other key information.

- **Do you plan to use functionality not already available on mobile websites?** GPS, audio, images and video can all enhance your visitor's mobile experience. However, all of those features can already be included in your mobile website. If you plan to use functionality that's

only available on a smartphone or tablet, such as accessing the device's camera, phone, calendar or address book, developing a platform app might be a better option. For example, apps like LinkedIn allow users to seek further connections by syncing the app with the contacts on their mobile device.

Deciding Which One Is Right for Your Firm

Mobile apps offer some unique advantages—and their interactive nature leverages the unique processing power that smartphones and tablets offer, which will undoubtedly continue to grow.

However, if you can't make a strong business case for building an app, don't do it just to do it. Apps need to be managed and upgraded—you can't just release it and consider the job done. Providing users with an app that doesn't do much or quickly becomes noticeably outdated can actually make a firm look less tech-savvy.

To promote your firm, it's more essential that you have a website that can be viewed on a variety of devices.

Creating a mobile site, using responsive design to allow for different screen sizes and devices, will help ensure that the majority of users can access your firm's key credentials, contact information and other important content—and prevent your firm from missing out on new clients and potential business opportunities.

If you do decide to design an app, use a developer who has experience building them. You want to partner with someone who can offer advice on what functionality and content to offer, suggest how often it needs to be updated—and help generate any necessary new versions. ■



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