

iApp Therefore iAm

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They can help you to avoid traffic jams while steering clear of speed cameras, read the complete works of Charles Dickens, control your home television from the office, simulate rude noises or guide you to the nearest Mexican restaurant.

In fact, there appears to be very little that mobile phone apps cannot do, and consumers are enthusiastically embracing them, creating a wealth of commercial possibilities.

- Infomaniacs and satisficers;
- Building a walled garden;
- Some purists moan, but the mass market laps it up;
- Low barriers to entry encourage creativity;
- Idiocy as USP.

Commercial opportunities

The commercial possibilities for mobile phone apps are almost limitless. Some of the more useful and innovative iPhone apps include:

- In the UK, Tesco Clubcard holders can download an app that acts as a substitute for their loyalty card. It functions as a barcode that consumers scan at the checkout instead of the plastic itself to earn points;
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- RedLaser has the potential to save consumers money every time they use it: Point your iPhone at the bar code of most items in almost any store, and RedLaser will search the web and provide pricing information from a wide variety of on-line and brick-and-mortar vendors;
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- Shake and Bake helps consumers to minimise food waste by suggesting recipes using leftover ingredients. It asks users to add leftover food to an on-screen blender and then shake the iPhone to create the recipe;
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- For those who sometimes find themselves wondering where to eat or have a specific craving for a meal but cannot determine which restaurants serve it, The Good Food Guide app provides such restaurant details as menus, reviews and prices. Moreover, its global positioning system (GPS) functionality displays the options depending on the consumer's location;
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- The Restaurant Nutrition app provides information on the calorific content of hundreds of quick-service restaurant meals from such chains as KFC;
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- The Stylish Girl app can help a consumer to organise and catalogue their wardrobe, in addition to sharing it with friends. They can also download images of their wish list items and see how they fit in with the rest of their wardrobe;
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- DirecTV's DVR Scheduler app allows users to programme their digital video recorder when they are away from home;
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- Locate a Pint uses GPS to locate both the consumer and the nearby pubs serving Guinness. It then provides the name, address and telephone number of selected pubs, access to directions, and even an email setup to invite friends along.

Background

Launched on July 11, 2008, Apple's iPhone App Store has become the biggest phenomena of recent years. Within three days of its launch, ten million apps had been downloaded by iPhone users, and by late January 2010, this figure had soared to three billion.

The number of available apps has exhibited similarly exponential growth: By the end of 2008, there were 10,000 apps available, and this figure had reached 140,000 by January 2010.

Source: Apple Inc.

Other mobile phone manufacturers have attempted to jump on the apps bandwagon: These include Nokia's Ovi Store, Blackberry's App World, Palm's App Catalog and Google's Android Market.

Even Microsoft has attempted to get in on the act with its Windows Marketplace for Mobile. However, none of its rivals

have come close to matching Apple in terms of either download numbers or the breath of available software.

Infomaniacs and satisficers

Apart from the popularity of the iPhone itself, many reasons have been cited for the appeal of iPhone Apps. These include a relatively simple and low-cost pricing structure, as well as consumer familiarity with the company's iTunes store for downloading music.

While undoubtedly factors, the real genius of the apps concept lies in its ability to appeal both to those who want instant access to an unlimited amount of information (sometimes dubbed 'infomaniacs') and their antithesis, those seeking a much more limited amount of information that is 'good enough' for their purposes (sometimes called 'satisficers').

The driving force behind the infomaniac's 'infolust' is the need for power and empowerment, or at least the illusion thereof, something apps can literally put at their fingertips.

As for satisficers, apps can guide them to the specific information they require (such as the nearest tapas bar or the cheapest supermarket in which to purchase their favourite cereal) with a minimum of fuss.

According to Professor Barry Schwartz, a psychologist from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania and the author of "The Paradox of Choice", "There is vastly too much choice in the modern world and we are paying an enormous price for it. It makes us feel helpless, mentally paralysed and profoundly dissatisfied."

Apps can play an important role in curbing this 'information overload.'

Simplicity often trumps originality when it comes to apps: According to one developer, "The idea doesn't have to be unique. It's not rocket science that you might want to be able to retrieve train information on your phone, it just comes down to execution."

Building a walled garden

One of the major criticisms of Apple's approach to apps is the tight control it maintains over what consumers can do with the device.

According to one tech commentator,

"Can you define as a platform something that has gatekeepers? I think not: if it's got people who stop stuff going in, you call it a 'walled garden.' You can't have a half-open platform: It's like being half-pregnant. Openness to all comers constitutes the difference between a platform, like Android, and a walled garden, like the iPhone."

This can hold back innovation, and Apple has already delayed the launch of a number of apps that it considered to be detrimental to its commercial interests and those of its partners, including the Skype internet telephony service.

One US blogger questions Apple's role as "...a benevolent dictator, well-suited to acting as guardian of what sorts of things you should and should not be allowed to run on your devices."

Some purists moan, but the mass market laps it up

However, the question must be asked that apart from a small number of journalists, bloggers and self-confessed 'techies' (and, potentially, competition authorities), does anyone else really care about this shortcoming? The rampant popularity of the iPhone and the app store would suggest that the answer is probably no.

Indeed, for many ordinary consumers, particularly the previously-discussed satisficers and those who find technology intimidating, this may actually be a boon, as it streamlines and simplifies the user experience, as well as making it more difficult for viruses and other malware to infect the device.

Lower barriers to entry encourage creativity

Others maintain that the App Store concept encourages creativity and originally by lowering barriers to entry for programmers:

According to David Rowan, editor of Wired UK magazine,

"What's good about the App Store is that there's quite a low barrier to entry, so many of these programmers actually have day jobs and are just working on these apps in their spare time."

Idiocy as USP

The range of applications available for the iPhone range from those that are entertaining and informative to those that are controversial or simply idiotic.

An example of the latter was an application called "I am Rich," the only purpose of which was to let others know that one is wealthy enough to afford it (it cost US\$999.99).

It was eventually withdrawn by Apple after they received widespread negative media coverage.

However, it could be argued that such media 'microversies' (small, ultimately insignificant, 'storm in a teacup'-type controversies) actually benefit the Apple brand in the long run by reinforcing its media omnipotence. Moreover, frivolity may actually be a source of appeal for many apps.

According to one UK blogger:

"If an app only costs 49p, people don't mind if they only use it once or twice, and it's not even the end of the world if it actually turns out to be a bit rubbishy."

Outlook

As smartphone prices continue to decline and the coverage of high-speed mobile phone networks spreads, these devices will gradually become more accessible to less affluent consumers, particularly in emerging markets, significantly broadening the potential market for apps.

Growth is also likely to be boosted by developer efforts to boost interoperability i.e. to make it easier to create apps for multiple platforms with little duplication of effort.

Furthermore, the instant gratification provided by apps will continue to facilitate a shift in computing from desktop to mobile devices.

Finally, with the imminent launch of Apple's iPad tablet computer, apps appear poised to make the jump from mobile phones into mainstream computing, opening up a new vista for developers.

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