

# Mobile sites vs. Apps...which to choose?

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## Why go mobile?

Mobile means your customers can access your site anywhere in the world - whilst they are waiting for the bus, getting on a train or simply passing by the time of day. Gone were the days when you had to sit at a desk, tied down by wires to browse the Internet. Mobile Internet has arrived.

According to e-consultancy (2010) mobile internet usage will overtake PC usage by 2013 - which is not in the too distant future. Think back to when the mobile web did not exist, the only way of getting through to your customers was via traditional marketing channels and the Internet (via a computer). Since the mobile web, this has broadened the reach of customers and is also providing an additional channel to increase sales. In 2009 eBay announced that they had generated \$380 million in sales through their mobile commerce channel.



Figure 1 The mobile web. Mobile internet usage will overtake PC usage by 2013

It is also vital to consider whether your competitors have gone mobile. If they have, then you may be missing out on those extra sales. However it is important to note that just because your competitors have gone mobile, this may not be necessarily the best approach for you. Ensure that you have a firm mobile strategy in place, rather than rushing the product to market and getting it wrong.

There are two alternatives to having a mobile presence. The first is designing a mobile site and the second is designing a mobile app. There are both benefits and drawbacks of each of these approaches and we will take a look at these here. The key is to consider your target audience and determine how loyal your customers are.

## Mobile sites

Mobile sites are designed specifically for web-capable mobile phones, and of course can only be accessed when there is a connection to the internet. They are often simplified versions of the main website, with fewer graphics and basic UI elements such as drop downs and checkboxes, which are better suited to a small mobile phone screen. There are many examples of mobile sites out there, to name a few – John Lewis, Marks and Spencers, Asos, Tesco Direct, Halfords and Trip Advisor.

In October 2010, only having recently launched their mobile site, Asos had taken 23,000 mobile orders. This clearly shows the power of having a mobile site.

A further example is the John Lewis mobile site. John Lewis currently have 100,000 visits every week from mobile users.

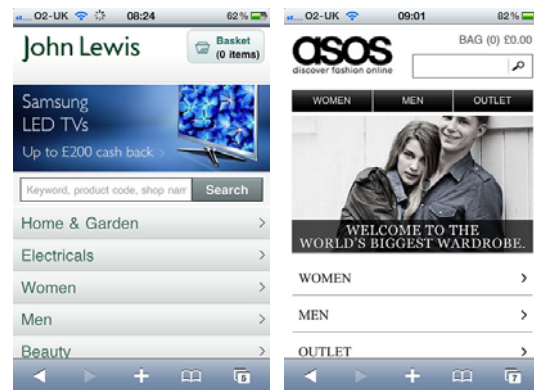


Figure 2 John Lewis and Asos mobile sites

## Why have a mobile site (compared with an app)?

The main benefit of having a mobile site over an app, is that it is not 'mobile device' specific. As it is not designed for a particular device e.g. iPhone, the site will appeal to and can be accessed by a larger audience – be it users of an iPhone, HTC, LG or Motorola mobile phone. Following on from this, from an organisation's point of view there is no need to design multiple versions for different platforms, as is the case with apps. This can be both time consuming and costly.

A further benefit is that once your team have agreed on a final design, mobile sites can be launched quickly. They do not need to undergo

approval by third parties, or as is the case with iPhone apps, it does not need to be approved by Apple before it can be released.

In addition, as mobile sites do not have to be downloaded directly to the phone and can be accessed by carrying out a general search in the Internet browser, one could argue that more users are likely to come across it as they do not have to download a specific app to be able to use it and purchase from it.

However a possible drawback of having a mobile site is that users have to remember the name of your organisation and/or have it saved in their favourites, as opposed to having it sitting on your desktop as an app would. As e-consultancy pointed out 'Your users have to remember you exist...If they don't, and they don't add your website to their home screen, they're likely to forget about your website' (e-consultancy, June 2011)

### Apps

Mobile apps are small applications that are downloaded onto your smart phone and with many, once they have been downloaded can be accessed without an internet connection. They are designed specifically for smart phones and for a specific operating system (OS). Two of the more popular operating systems are iOS used for iPhones, and Android used for a range of mobiles such as the HTC range. There are currently over 300,000 apps available on the app store according to Apple (for the iPhone) and they have exceeded 1 billion downloads. These range from apps to help with cooking, fitness, shopping, entertainment, gaming, business, music, navigation; the list is endless. Examples include Amazon, Facebook, BBC News, Interflora, Next, Comet and eBay. As for the Android market, there are just over 84,000 apps available.



Figure 3 There are currently over 300,000 apps available from the Apple app store

### Why have an app (compared with a mobile site)?

The main benefit of having an app over a mobile site is that in particular the iOS based devices such as the iPhone, iPad and iPod account for the bulk of the use of mobile phone devices in the UK. In 2010, Apple had 63.7% of the market share of smart phones in the UK and Android had 15.2%. However more recently in 2011, during the first quarter trends have altered. Whilst Apple's iPhones sales have roughly doubled, their market share has only risen slowly compared with Android's market share that has risen steeply to 36% (L. Meyer, 2011)

Apps tend to provide a richer experience, compared with mobile sites. More and more apps are using features such as barcode scanning (taking a photograph of a barcode using your smart phone and ordering the product), location based services and interacting with the outdoors e.g. using apps to identify stars in the night sky.

One could also argue that if a customer has gone to the effort of downloading your app, they are more likely to be loyal and use it, as every time they switch on their smart phone, the app will be on their 'desktop'.

Being on the app store, particularly if your app reaches the top 25 will assist in letting customers know about your app and will boost the number of downloads. Not only will this increase sales (if it is ecommerce) but will raise brand awareness.

As mentioned previously, with many apps once they have been downloaded it is possible to use them without an internet connection. However this does depend on the type of app that is being designed. Of course if there are transactional elements to the app, this will most likely require an internet connection.

### Why not have both?

If time and budget are not an issue, why not have both? As long as there is a clear mobile strategy in place, and you have clearly defined your target audience providing both a mobile site and app will reach out to a larger audience, meaning customers from a wide range of mobile devices can access your content and products. Examples of organisations that have both are Amazon, Facebook, eBay and YouTube.

A good example is Trip Advisor. When entering the site on an iPhone, the user is presented with the option to continue onto their mobile site or is cross sold their iPhone app. With the click of a button, the user can download their app. This seems to be a very good approach.

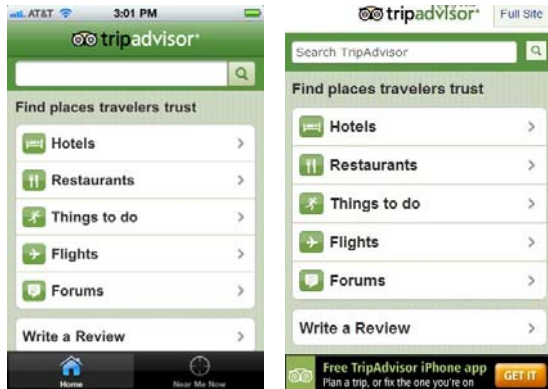


Figure 4 Trip advisor have both an app (on left) and a mobile site (on right)

### Combining mobile and traditional channels

Whether choosing an app or a mobile site there are a number of ways in which it is possible to combine both mobile and traditional marketing channels. A popular feature is the use of location services; this could be either to find out the users current location, and from this find their nearest store or houses in their local area. This feature is particularly useful and saves time for the user. An example of this is the property app rightmove.



Figure 5 Rightmove app using location services

Also becoming increasingly popular is targeted mobile marketing using location services. For example if walking in a particular shopping centre, appropriate promotions and discounts from these shops could be pushed to the user's phone.

Another is to allow customers to search for a product and reserve it. They can then later collect it at their local store. An example of this is John Lewis' 'click and collect' option. Although excellent in practice, this is not available for all products.

### Conclusion

There are benefits and drawbacks of both apps and mobile sites. What is obvious is that if a clear mobile strategy is put in place and the target users have been clearly defined, this is the key to success. If the organisation has a strong brand identity and users are likely to be brand loyal, then an app may be the way to go. As described, Apple in 2010 had 63.7% of the market share of smart phones in the UK and therefore the majority are using the iOS platform. However if thinking about a long term solution, and you want to appeal to a larger audience i.e. all smart phone users, then a mobile site should be produced as this will work on all platforms.

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