

## MOBILE

## Apps vs responsive design:

## The mobile dilemma

For many consumers their phone is the first place they turn to shop. **Caroline Baldwin** investigates whether retailers need to continue developing mobile apps, or invest in responsive websites

**H**ow's the app coming along? – or much sterner words to that effect – is probably one of the most common questions retail chiefs have asked their tech teams over the past three years.

But perhaps a better question is this: do retailers need to invest in mobile apps at all, or should they be looking at responsive web design or sites designed specifically for the mobile?

Retailers are well aware that consumers demand immediacy, and increasingly they are choosing to shop using their smartphone. Retail sales generated through mobile are expected to increase from £9.7bn to £53.6bn by 2024 according to data from Barclays (see p32). The smartphone's effect on retail cannot be overstated.

While this is a massive opportunity for retailers, it also poses a challenge. They need to ensure their mobile platforms are optimised for a variety of devices with different functionalities, operating systems and screen sizes – from a four inch compact smartphone to a 10 inch tablet.

### There's an app for that

This is not a new problem. Since 2007, when Apple revolutionised the smartphone market with its iPhone, businesses have had to think about how their brand is perceived in only a few inches. The simple answer was to build an app. Or multiple apps, as Asos has done. The fashion retailer has been leading the way when

it comes to mobile, even revealing it will be one of the first businesses to launch an app for the Apple Watch.

Chief executive Nick Robertson says the retailer continues to invest in mobile apps, preferring to keep different parts of its digital efforts separate, such as an app for shopping, as well as further apps for recommendations and inspirational content.

"I like that we can have different apps for different functions," he says.

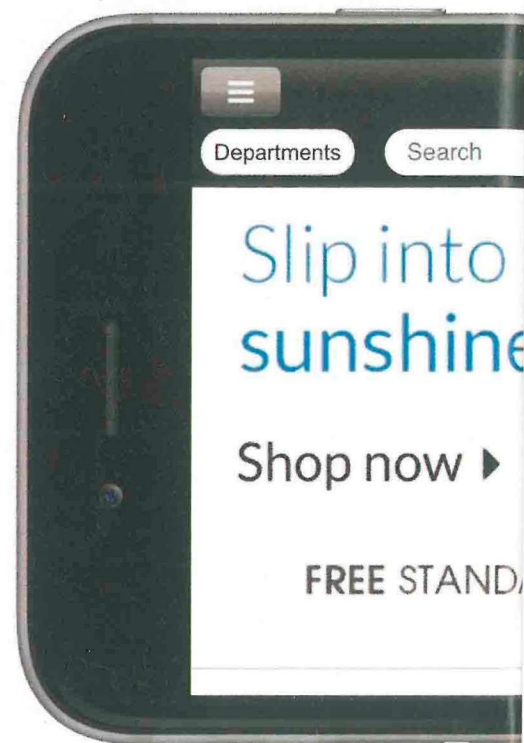
JD Sports finance chief Brian Small says the retailer still concentrates on apps, but also operates mobile-specific websites using adaptive technology, which is one step better than responsive because it recognises the exact device and serves the appropriate content.

"I think you get a website that's much better tuned than a responsive website," he says.

Debenhams chief executive Michael Sharp says: "I actually think apps are less relevant". The retailer says 61% of visits to Debenhams.com come from mobile devices, which is its fastest growing channel, causing it to adopt a mobile-first strategy.

"When we're configuring anything – it's how does it look on a mobile device? How does it work? Is it going to be fat-finger friendly?" says Sharp.

But not all retailers are as digitally savvy. The Barclays report found that while nearly half of retailers claim at least some of their sales are generated through a mobile device, less than 3% believe their business is at the cutting-edge when it comes to being mobile-ready and a



further 70% said they did not offer a mobile website or a mobile app for consumers.

Fashion flash Sales site Secretsales.com generates 60% of its revenue through mobile and 35% specifically through smartphone devices, but the retailer is shunning mobile apps in favour of responsive websites that change depending on the size of the screen.

Chief executive Nish Kukadia argues retailers are not getting as much traction through their apps as they sometimes believe. "Building an app was just going to slow us down, so we went down the road of a responsive mobile site," he said at Retail Week Live in March.

One of the reasons building apps is an arduous process is because of the multitude of operating systems: Apple's iOS, Google's Android, Microsoft's Windows Phone – which is also used by Nokia – and BlackBerry 10.

For example, if an app developer creates an iOS app, they build it once and provide occasional updates with each new release of iOS. Similarly, Android is one single



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**Nish Kukadia, Secretsales.com**

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## MOBILE PLATFORM OPTIONS FOR RETAILERS

- 1. RESPONSIVE WEB** is a retailer's "digital welcome mat" and needs to be developed to satisfy a broad audience who are searching for products online. It is also a must-have as responsive websites are quickly identified by search engines.
- 2. ADAPTIVE WEB** ideal for retailers wanting to contextualise the experience further and deliver mobile device specific content.
- 3. MOBILE APPS** are for retailers that want to encourage further interactions with customers, such as allowing them to manage loyalty points or providing a secure payment process. Mobile apps should be considered if customers want to experience the brand on their phone all the time.

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But businesses can be held back by legacy technology constraints that make a move to responsive difficult if a retailer is not starting from scratch.

### Which to choose?

Both Grannan and Tim Johnson, head of enterprise at mobile agency Somo, say they are having many conversations with retailers confused over which route to take.

"Fundamentally, it's about what you're trying to achieve," says Johnson. "Is it to be discoverable or build relationships with loyal users?"

Johnson says a responsive website is sufficient if all retailers want to do is be high up on a Google search, but if the goal is to create a relationship with customers, an app is more appropriate.

He argues apps are a good way of engaging shoppers already interested in a brand. "With an app, the customer's got to know about it, see an advert, go to the app store, download it, and then it's occupying space on the device," says Johnson. But he adds: "It has to justify itself by being used over and over again."

"If you're just going to a shop once and buy something, I'm not going to be downloading an app," he says, explaining that since the early days of smartphones, applications have flooded the market and combined with notifications chirping every hour or so, consumers are more likely to hit delete if the app does not add value to their lives.

Johnson says retailers ideally need both: "A web solution and top it up with an app for high value users."

He adds that high street retailers with no mobile presence must prioritise getting a responsive website and then look to add context via an application.

However, Johnson says if you're a smaller business just starting out "your entire model might be based around an app."

He says: "If you're delivering food boxes or a razor blade subscription service you need something cool and exciting."

Retailers need to think carefully about how people use their sites before they greenlight any development. An app is no panacea, but the right platform can swipe away many mobile migraines.



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application, but is a much more laborious process as developers have to do far more testing on the various different screen sizes because different smartphone brands use it.

And once retailers have paid for iOS and Android apps, they often stop there, not bothering with the less popular operating systems.

### Responsive design

On the other hand, responsive sites only have to be built once and the same pages can be seen across desktop computers, tablets, and

smartphones, which is beginning to look more favourable for retailers who are not prepared to bet on technology which may be superseded.

Forrester's ecommerce specialist Mark Grannan says adaptive delivery is typically the most mature version of responsive web design because it recognises the limitations of different devices and switches content out appropriately. But this means that effort needs to be made when developing an adaptive website.

Grannan says responsive sites carry significant benefits, including faster design-development cycles and better performance.