The following guest article has been written exclusively for InternetRetailing by Simon Howship. An experienced 'shopkeeper' by trade, Simon once managed Dixons PC World stores throughout the country. However, a self-confessed technology aficionado he has also worked as Head of E-Commerce at Freeserve, and run a venture capital technology business in Canary Wharf. Amalgamating his experience from the last 20 years, he now spearheads native mobile app projects for retailers throughout the UK and internationally, in his role as Managing Director of Common Agency.

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What's 'appening?

There can be no disputing the power of native mobile apps in the retail space, but when it comes to best practice, which brands are excelling and where is more strategic thinking required? Experienced retailer and passionate technology aficionado *Simon Howship*, Managing Director of Common Agency, shares his thoughts.

I N THE fast paced world of m-commerce, the app space is constantly changing. It can therefore become difficult to distinguish between what is a meaningless marketing stunt and what is an act of pure retail genius.

Consumer-centric initiatives of any kind will usually add some value to an m-commerce strategy, even if only on a brand recognition and enhancement level. However, in such cases, the return may be harder to quantify, which lessens the staying power of mobile within the multichannel mix. If seen purely as a 'nice to have', rather than an integral revenue generator, the app will soon lose the attention, and investment, of the board.

When it comes to best practice apps, retailers should therefore stick to the business of retailing and the focus should be ROI.

If an app is intrinsically linked to the opportunity to acquire, transact with and retain customers, every ounce of design, development and iteration effort is justified, as is the expenditure. Achieve an ROI and budgets will no longer paralyse decision making. Streamline the payment process and the benefits are magnified further still.

Amazon has pioneered the '1 click' checkout process in retail, which echoes the benefits of

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purchasing from the iTunes store – customers' details are securely stored meaning a password input will complete the transaction. Alleviating the need for shoppers to repeatedly enter private details on a small screen undoubtedly goes a long way to overcoming the much-quoted 75% basket abandonment rate.

The advent of Apple Pay and the evolution of the mobile wallet presents further opportunity, something which pure play Etsy – in my opinion a brilliant marketplace app for artisan designers – capitalised on virtually instantly. However, whilst Apple Pay has dominated the headlines, in truth a number of retailers are lagging behind when it comes to embracing its full potential. Longer term this will create a barrier at the point-of-sale, surely something no brand can afford.

STUNT VS SUBSTANCE

In highlighting the need for a revenue-focused strategy, this is not to say apps cannot be fun or novel, app development should be underpinned by a considered, strategic decision rather than using technology for technology's sake.

Years ago, the industry became abuzz with talk of augmented reality for example, but grappling with it just to show off reaped little reward. CSL (now Sofaworks) used it quite practically, enabling customers to see different sofas, virtually, in their own home environment. This USP enhanced the buying experience, and encouraged store visits, to some degree. But still the feature has been dropped.

The 2015 equivalent of augmented reality is beacon technology – equally not a new concept, but a 'hot topic' that brands will only benefit from if they define how it adds value to their retail proposition and utilise an app to tie everything together. Bombarding consumers with beacon fuelled messaging, or landing them in an app with a poor UX, on the other hand, will be nothing but a turn off.

We see other examples of seemingly marketing-led app initiatives working well. Again, the key to them being a success, rather than just a stunt, is the extent to which they can support the retailer's bottom line. Argos' My Christmas Wishlist, for instance, is a fun, well-executed and child-focused app, with the addition of more toys and a photo booth selfie game for 2015. But it's not just a great idea because it is a hit with kids. It also helps alleviate parents' Christmas shopping stress levels. So, armed with a rundown of

Once again Etsy deserves some recognition here. The savvy retailer has moved to a formulated fortnightly native app update schedule, vocally demonstrating the brand's commitment to optimum UX. Whilst this update frequency is not necessary for all, continued iteration, on some level, is crucial.

It boils down to having a roadmap. There's nothing wrong with starting small and focusing on key inventory lines within one native app. This minimises risk and keeps the investment manageable. It would be a fantastic way for Debenhams to re-enter the app space, perhaps with a dedicated flower or perfume store, for example. IOS would be the best place to start, given how its figures dwarf Android when it comes to customers' propensity to purchase.
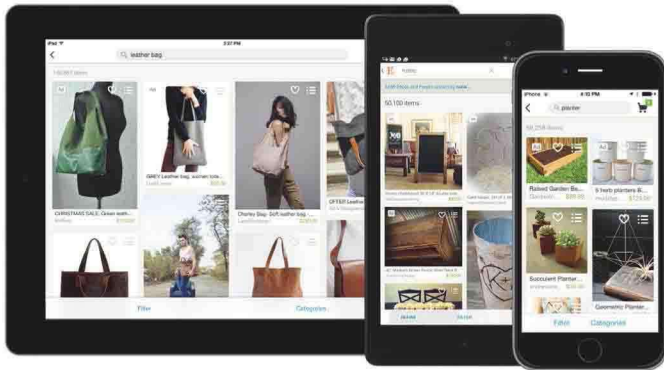
Over time, more product lines can be added, personalisation options introduced and native apps engineered for different devices and operating systems. The retailer thus takes customers on a journey, building relationships and loyalty over time and acquiring new users along the way.

This is how the PhotoBox app has evolved, since its inception in 2012. Fast forward to the present day and the gifting retailer has native apps for iPhone, iPad and Android available in 16 countries and in more than 10 different languages. Elsewhere, the Starbucks app has really matured, progressing from a social, loyalty-driven app, that successfully communicated with a captive audience via targeted push notifications, to one that now also facilitates hassle-free payment at the point-of-sale. The progression has been gradual, strategic and successful.

MANAGING BLOAT & MEASUREMENT

Whilst evolution is paramount, obsolete products and features should be cleansed along the way, to avoid unnecessary bloat. A growing product or feature set inflates an app's size, and increases the likelihood of it being deleted from a user's device.

One brand that has successfully presented a much wider product range, however, is Screwfix. They've harnessed the potential to have content canned in their native app, enabling users to quickly and easily access their entire catalogue without the need for constant connectivity. This is a fantastic product research mechanism, which will have greatly contributed to Screwfix securing the highest overall review rating for ▶

their children's favourite products, they are encouraged to buy from the brand that helped them pull the list together. Argos really has, without a doubt, earned its place among the Rolls Royce of successful multichannel retailers this year.

ITERATE AND EVOLVE

It should be recognised however, that even the most successful brands would be naïve in thinking they have their m-commerce strategy nailed. The world of mobile is moving at such a pace, that regular iteration is essential. Not only does this ensure apps remain fully up-to-date and bug free, it also plays a major part in app discovery whilst encouraging reengagement on a user's device.

a FTSE100 app in 2014, far outstripping the app performance of sister-brand B&Q.

The power of native apps does not end there. The richer UX and ability to use gestures, swipes and pinches to facilitate better navigation, is proven to secure greater engagement and conversion levels. ASOS – very much a marketplace disruptor – was one of the first brands to take full advantage of native app UX. As a result, they've driven loyalty and customer stickiness, and maintained their position at the forefront of the fashion app space.

As with any business exercise – in the retail sector and beyond – measuring performance against initial objectives is key. This analysis should begin at the outset of an app's journey, with user group prototype testing at the design stage, and A-B testing during development. Once successfully launched, in-app analytics showcase user behaviour too, which helps to shape the app's future iteration and engagement mechanisms. It will also fuel personalisation, as we've seen with Amazon.

However, we cannot forget that customers lie at the heart of our decision-making process. To a certain extent they dictate the decisions we make. That's why retailers who are afraid of the pace of change risk being left behind. Many bricks and mortar brands still frown on showrooming, for example, but armed with trusted supercomputers in their pockets, consumers will increasingly adopt such in-store behaviour. Rather than fearing this trend, French cosmetics

company Sephora actively promotes it. Customers can scan items in store, via the brand's app, to access product reviews and make an informed decision based on price and peer opinion. This empowering strategy ensures happy, engaged, trusting customers, conducive to longer-term loyalty.

There's no 'one size fits all' advice of course – examples of best practice should be reviewed and tailored according to a retailer's own proposition but brands have to be 'located' where their customers go looking, and increasingly, this is in the app store. Now is the time to get them on board with an app in readiness for when mobile spend really rockets.