



Three Million iPads Can't Be Wrong: Six Steps to Help PR Tap into App Development



By Eugene Goland®, President, DataArt

One of the best things about PR agencies is they always have great insight into what the current hot topics are. So the iPad—they will be good friends with it by now. For their clients, they have likely extolled its virtue as the new gold standard for companies to offer their goods and services directly to customers in key demographics. For a PR agency's clients, the value of creating a company iPad app is immediately obvious. And because PR agencies are seen as the one to go to for advice on the trendy new thing, if the idea of creating an iPad or iPhone app hasn't already come up in a conversation with a client, it will.

The explosion of popularity around mobile devices, especially the iPad (three million sold as of June 22), has brought the worlds of PR and technology even closer together. Any conversation with a client that starts with "Should we build an iPad app?" is likely to end with "How do we do that?" If you're a PR pro and also a bit of a tech geek, you might know the answer. But what if you're not a techie? What if your idea of high-tech is your seven-year-old laptop, or a second-generation iPod? What do you tell your clients about actually creating mobile apps, and specifically, iPad apps? What do they need to know? What do you need to know to keep your reputation as the smart and savvy, PR agency?

Here are some tips from the application development projects we've done with many companies:

1. Pick clear objectives: Imagine a boutique outfitter has a new coat it wants to push for the new season. There are loads of boutique shops with similar coats, so the challenge is not just getting the word out, but showing people that *this* is the coat they must have. Can the app let potential customers "try the coat on" virtually by uploading a picture of themselves and entering a few measurements? Maybe even let them "try on" competitor coat styles to show them they're not worth it? Customers can show their friends how they look in the new coat, get their "approval" (or not), and even buy it—all from their favorite coffee shop and without having to take four subway lines to find out it doesn't look right. Plus, the clothier has provided its customers with something indispensable—trusted, independent advice. They'll come back for fashion advice in the future.

2. Start small: There is a lot to be said for rolling out app functionality in stages. Suggest that your client start with something simple and well-executed, and that supports a main goal for them. Critically, also suggest they build a function that makes it easy to get customer feedback. Can they monitor activity on the app to see what kinds of new functions would be useful next? It is also likely that by taking this staged approach, the information gleaned from how customers interact with the company via the app can be used to support other sales and PR programs. The flip side, though, is also hugely important: Respect a customer's privacy!

3. Focus on what makes the iPad different: Touch screens. Motion sensors. Mobile Internet. High-definition. Multimedia. A good app will involve all these things. Done right, the user feels like they are interacting with the brand. *Wired's* iPad app is a good example. A lot of iPad games out there have done this quite well. Can your client's app include a game? Also think about connectivity. The amount of data available via the Web is (obviously) immense. Make the app about more than just their two acres of brand real estate—put what your client provides in context and show that through the iPad.

4. Engage a developer with the right stuff: Your client's IT person is probably great at fixing printer problems. Designing and building an iPad app is a different animal. There are lots of application developers out there; the trick to finding the right one for your client is making sure they know your client's industry. If your client is, for example, a financial services technology provider (trading algorithms, hedge funds, etc.), isn't it wise to have a developer that understands trading algorithms and hedge funds? Take the time to understand the expertise of a developer before engaging. Also, do they understand the Apple approval process? Can they ensure the app you've spent four months developing won't get rejected?

5. Address the money question—development: App development cost depends mostly on the complexity of functionality. A more complex app means more features need to be developed, which means higher costs. Here are some ways to keep costs down, or at least keep expectations reasonable:

- **Experience:** Can the developer estimate the cost of similar competitors' apps they may have done?
- **Pricing:** Can they work under a price cap? Would they use a revenue-sharing model to balance the up-front cost?
- **Methods:** Some developers take a list of requirements, then go away until the end result is ready. This works when requirements are very clear up front. If requirements are less well-defined, other methods can handle feedback throughout the development process. The right methods can save money by making sure each function is just right.

6. Address the *other* money question: How much should the app cost? Most applications in the App Store are under \$10. But that should not confuse newcomers offering their first app. It's an open market, and general marketing rules apply. Since the market is young, some offerings can get away with a higher price tag to start if they offer a true first. But pricing decisions should be driven by long-term considerations: The retail boutique's "virtual dressing room" app might be a unique offering at launch, but someone will imitate soon enough, creating competition and driving down costs.

In general, pricing should remain consistent across whatever Web-based or mobile platform the app is being developed for. For example, our client in the search business (Wagumo) offered their app free on the iPhone and iPad, mirroring their similar Web-based app. Also consider advertising revenues, or revenues from direct e-commerce transactions made possible through the app. Can the app be designed to facilitate advertising to draw in more money? Apple's profit sharing system keeps 30 percent of any revenues from purchases facilitated by the Apple App Store. Companies can choose to not go through the App Store, but they then have to think about how to drive attention to their new app, where they will host downloads, how the e-commerce transaction will be facilitated, etc. The App Store does make things simpler.

These tips should arm you for the world of iPad app development for PR purposes. Go forth, PR pros, and lead your clients well.

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