Today's Consumer Trends Reveal Tomorrow's Mobile OS Winners

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The 2012 mobile marketplace is already looking like a noisy, crowded confluence of stakeholders. Given the amount of distraction it's hard to understand where to look, what's important, and what's not. As a result, application developers tend to wait to be sure what they observe is a trend and not a random fluctuation.

Developers and publishers take about six months to react to changes in consumer demands. Then tack on the three to six months needed to develop an app and you're facing almost a year of overhead between the motion in the consumer market and the observed change in the software market associated with it. Of all the new things we can expect for 2012, the decrease of diversion fads over sustainable developer trends is not one of them.

For example, Android was increasing its marketshare at an amazing pace during 2010 but only in the end of this year we did notice interest in the platform among our customers. The true surge in demand for Android development happened as late as the second quarter of 2011. Right now the demand for Android development is on par with the demand for iOS resources.

Most prominently, 2012 has all the chances to become the year of Windows Phone. Microsoft did a great job during the last year to bring its platform up to par with the competitors. Good handsets from HTC, Samsung, and Nokia appeared on the market and the sales results would definitely be good.

Even now some of our customers already are demonstrating cautious but steady interest in the new platform. They aren't ready to invest in it yet but definitely are examining it for the future. Considering the overhead mentioned above we may expect a demand in WP7 specialists to start to grow by the middle of 2012 and see real volume by the end of the year.

On the other hand, there is a continuing decline in requests for software development for the RIM platform on the back end of circumspect interest in WP7. Right now, it's a good time for developers to invest in the knowledge of WP7 to be prepared for future demand.

The iOS/Android Split

Today's budgets for mobile development are split almost evenly between iOS and Android, yet enterprises treat these two platforms remarkably differently. Android is normally the first choice for apps that crowd-source data or deliver advertisements due to its enormous marketshare. These apps also may be ported to iOS later. With paid apps, the story is the opposite. Due to the way Google organized its marketplace, it's almost impossible to gain any profit from selling apps. Thus, paid apps are first developed for iOS and only then sometimes ported to Android.

The way porting is done to each of the platforms is also very different, and it's again directly linked with the approach the companies take to their app marketplaces. Apple forces developers to use its design guidelines and may even reject apps if their user interface (UI) is inconsistent with the platform. Alternatively, Android allows developers to do whatever pleases them. As a result, when the app is developed for Android and is later ported to iOS, the proper Android-style UI is developed with the iOS version completely reworked according to iOS UI guidelines to ensure both apps are equal in quality.

A tempting and common money-saving practice is to take the iOS or the parallel platform and transfer the iOS UI to Android. Many Android apps can make your Android look like iOS. However, they create poor customer experiences, and Android versions of many apps are worse than iOS versions in terms of UI quality.

Microsoft took the same route as Apple in regards to the WP7 UI. So, you can expect that porting to the WP7 will require a lot of work in UI adjustment in 2012. This can be a relatively costly exercise considering how deeply different WP7's UI concept is from what we are used to in iOS and Android. In many cases, completely different UI will be required.

The Tablet Wars

On the 2012 tablet front, waters are murkier still. Apple's iPad relentlessly outsells competitors but the main reason for its success is hard to pinpoint. Trends from the handset market do not correspond directly here as consumers see tablets more like PCs than phones.

Mainstream Android failed in the tablet market despite Google's efforts. It seems content availability and ecosystem plus reasonable price are the keys to success here. This explains the fail of the Honeycomb (expensive, limited content) version of Android for tablets and the success of the Kindle Fire (reasonably priced, easily available content).

We have experienced almost no orders for software for any other tablets but the iPad, but in the last few weeks some customers have been asking us what we think about the Kindle Fire. In 2012, Amazon will likely try to capitalize on its success in taking the lower segment of the tablet market. Google will try to grow itself an ecosystem to compete with the iPad.

Google took the first step in this direction recently with the introduction of the Google Music shop, though it isn't a protracted attempt. The biggest problem will be the app market, which is currently a mess, and it's not completely clear how Google plans to instill order.

Given these factors, it’s unlikely the situation will change until the very end of 2012. Windows 8 may also somehow influence this segment but it’s a dark horse now with too little known about it, and we likely won’t know any more until the end of 2012 as well.

It seems we will have not two but three big players in the mobile operating system (OS) field and some heated competition on the tablet side by the end of 2012 if not sooner. Major apps will require not two but three versions, two of them with distinctively different UI. This is good news for the development community as it will inevitably require growth in opportunities as budgets allow.