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Is Your Business Ready for an App?

Apps take what we used to do with traditional tools like paper, a computer, website or phone and automate that interaction for people on the go.

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To app or not to app. That is a good question for small-business owners and millionaire wannabees.

As our society becomes more mobile, so does our technology. Apps permeate the mobile space.

What exactly is an app? Tom Swip, president/CEO of Swip Systems, a startup company mentor and developer of mobile apps, looks at it this way: "Think of what a customer, vendor or employee might have done with traditional tools like paper, a computer, website or phone and replace that interaction with an app accessed via a mobile device." Businesses might use an app to:

- Share order or shipment status, delivery dates, appointment availability and times (say, from a repair technician), with their customers.
- Communicate POs, inventory levels, production schedules or projections with their vendors.
- Provide employees with access to orders, schedules, job lists, clocking in/out, supplies – whatever they need to be successful in their job while on the go.

While an app won't necessarily replace existing technologies, it can supplement them by providing a more automated and mobile way of doing tasks and accessing information. Consider the example of an appliance service workforce. With an app, the service technician can get the day's work list by smartphone without going into the office (time savings and convenience). Key customer information, including turn-by-turn directions, can quickly be accessed (more time savings). Let's say several appointments go more quickly than expected. The service technician updates the job completions after each job via the app. It's 1 p.m. and there is only one more job on the technician's work list. Someone in the office can reshuffle work lists to keep him busy and keep customers happy by moving a job from an overloaded technician to his work list to meet the customer's appointment (better productivity, happier customers).

Are you ready to build your app? If so, there are a few critical items to consider. First of all, complexity. Business rules that digitize real-world conditions drive an app's usefulness. More complex business rules can sometimes increase development costs. What platform is best? Java for Android, Objective-C for iPhones, .NET for Windows Phone and more are available. What stores will the app be published to? Google Play, Apple App Store, Windows, etc. Other considerations can include scope creep, connections with web service and marketing.

It may be enticing to dream of developing the next "Angry Birds" app that has stand-alone value as a truly innovative and IP-protected app. However, the best bang for a small-business buck is to develop a high-quality, integrated app that can add to the value of your business by streamlining your processes so employees can do their jobs faster and more efficiently, making it easier for vendors to work with you or making your product or service more accessible to customers. In addition to enhanced employee productivity and increased sales, the benefits to a small business can include reduced operating expenses as well as potential additional tax incentives from the app development costs.

Join us at our next Sharp and On Point Speaker Series on Tuesday, August 18, from 7:30 to 9 a.m. at the Lodge Des Peres as Tom Swip, president/CEO of Swip Systems Inc. (www.swipsystems.com), shares his perspective on how to take your app from idea to app store, how to avoid development and marketing pitfalls, and how to best use an app in your business. To reserve your seat or for more information, visit www.sharpandonpoint.com or www.lopataflegel.com.



Laurie Griffith is a principal at Lopata, Flegel & Co. Accountants and Management Consultants. Join us at the free monthly Sharp and On Point Business Advisory Speaker Series from 7:30 to 9 a.m. on the third Tuesday of every month at the Lodge Des Peres. Learn business strategies you can immediately put in place to point your business in the right direction. For more information, visit www.sharpandonpoint.com.