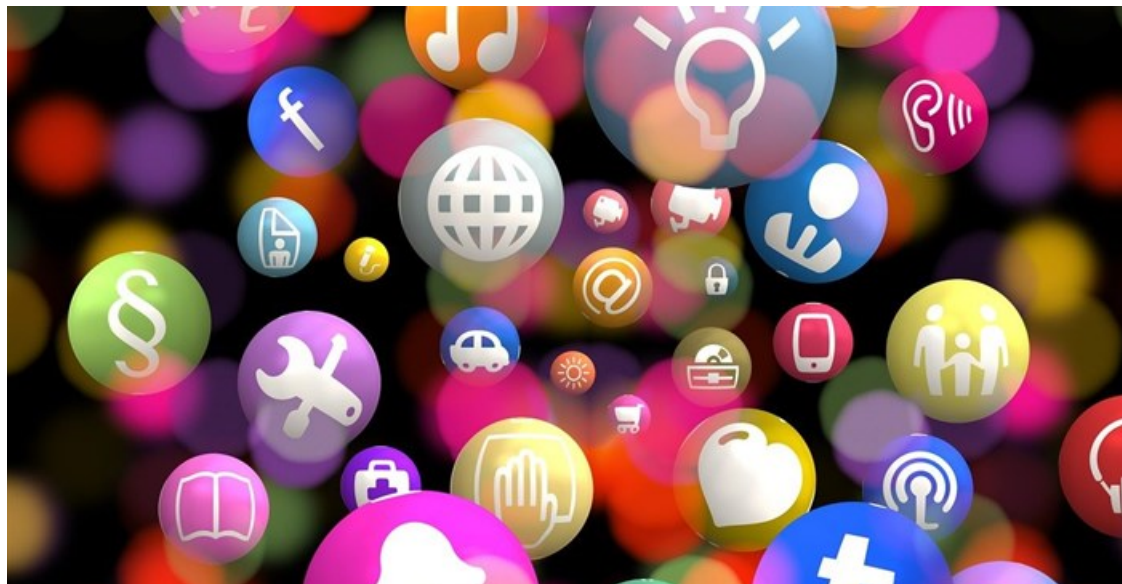


Forcing customers to use your app is brand vanity

By Pieter de Villiers

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Many brands remain obsessed with creating mobile apps. This not only defies trends that point to increasing consumer app apathy but can exclude a sizeable portion of your customers in emerging economies. Companies need to engage with their users where they are rather than forcing them onto an app, in what can only be described as brand vanity.



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In 2017 there were around 2.2 million apps available in the iOS app store and over 3 million on Google Play. And, while the number of apps being downloaded continues to rise, analysis shows that consumers are only using 30 apps per month and accessing just 9 on a day-to-day basis.

While these numbers still seem attractively high, in reality, the majority of the apps we use are for messaging (like Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and WeChat) and our social networking, gaming, leisure, dating or utility activities.

Despite the facts, the application strategy as the holy grail for digital transformation is still being pushed even within large progressive brands. What's more, some advertising agencies and digital consultants are still pushing apps as the best means for companies to connect with their customers. This has resulted in some organisations stubbornly doubling down on app strategies which are simply not showing a return on investment (ROI).

It's not immediately clear to us whether the fascination with apps is a roll-over from long overdue projects or whether brand owners equate a mobile-first strategy with a mobile app. Mobile-first in 2018 means customer first, and therefore embracing chat commerce in order to deliver services with convenience and simplicity in mind.

Why apps won't win the internet

The problem with apps goes beyond user fatigue. In the first instance, many apps are poorly designed, assuming technical sophistication which may not match reality for the average customer. Poor user interfaces and attempts to provide complex engagement can result in even the best ideas missing their targets due to lack of engagement.

Secondly, we all know that economic realities drive consumer behaviour. In Africa, new mobile phone users typically opt for feature phones over smartphones. With a longer battery life and a much more accessible price point, feature phones still allow for a basic internet connection, chat platforms like WhatsApp, and call and message functionality.

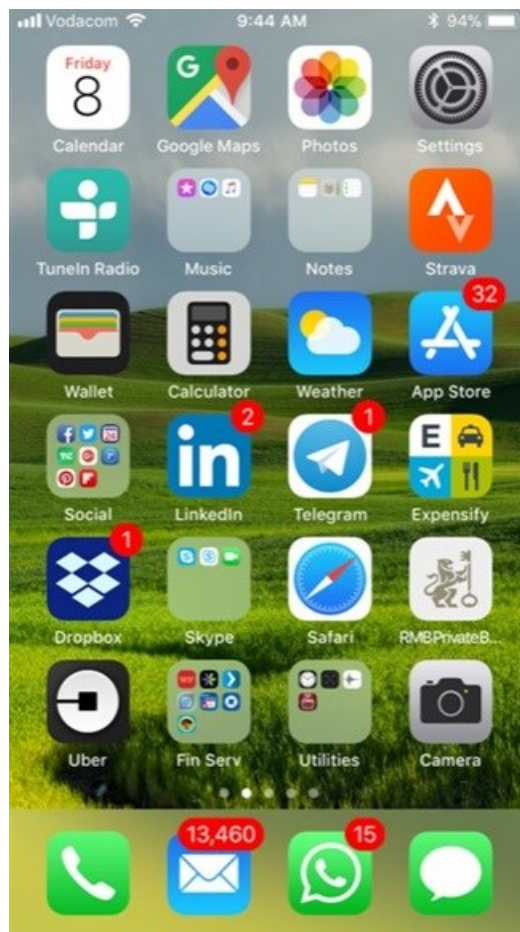
In these regions, the cost of an app – even if it's free – goes far beyond installing it. Constant updates require reliable and cheap access to the internet. For the average phone owner in an emerging market, this can be a serious challenge.

Thirdly, and most importantly, apps must be relevant to their intended market. Frequency of usage is a key measure of relevance.

Apps which are used on a daily basis, like health and fitness trackers, enjoy constant engagement. New features which are added are eagerly awaited by users who are happy to update their apps.

However, users may well question the relevance of the app if they are required to conduct updates on a monthly or even weekly basis when they are only making use of the app once or twice a year.

On average, I download one app per quarter. Some I use more frequently than others, but all of these apps need to be regularly updated to maintain security, update features and fix bugs. Many apps are pushing out updates much more frequently. I noticed over the past year that I could go from having all apps updated to 32 apps requiring an update in five days (as the screenshot shows).



When it comes to a customer-first digital strategy, companies should be asking themselves if an app is really the best way to reach their target audience.

In fact, at the end of 2016, Gartner [predicted](#) that by 2019, 20 percent of brands would ditch their mobile app. What's more, in its [2018 predictions](#), the company forecast that by 2021, more than 50 percent of corporations would spend more per annum on bots and chatbots than on mobile app development.

So, we need to ask, what is the alternative for CIOs, CDOs, CMOs, and digital leaders who are looking for ways to reach, retain and grow their customer base?

The logical app alternative

The old battle advice goes: *fight your enemy where they are not*. Military strategists agreed that having your enemy come to you and fight you on your own terms was preferable. In a world where customers have access to thousands of offerings and millions of deals online, we need to flip that idea to *Meet Your Customers Where They Are*.

Any marketer will tell you just a how difficult it is to drive app downloads. Development, cross-platform testing and user interface aside, the marketing campaign required to get customers to download the app can swallow entire annual budgets and still come up short.

Looking at the facts, it makes infinitely more sense to work within the digital platforms already being used by your target audience.

ABOUT PIETER DE VILLIERS

Pieter is the Group CEO of Clickatell, which he started 18 years ago with three fellow South Africans and has built up into a multi-million dollar company operating across multiple continents. A Silicon Valley experienced entrepreneur and angel investor, Pieter has a passion for mobile technology and the empowerment it leads to. He is one of the youngest mobile industry veterans in global telecoms, mobile messaging, and mobile payments.

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