

Designing for Mobile Context: Strategic Framework



Mobile apps are real deal and here to stay. But market is crowded, and success is eluding. With the flood of mobile development frameworks & new platforms popping up everyday, the focus from real research and strategic thinking is evading as well. This article presents a strategic framework to consider during discovery phase. When you are thinking about designing an app before you start requirements, designs and technical platforms, you must consider the environment and context really well. This will not only help you build a better app but will also change your users' habit and adopt your application.



In our mobile devices not all apps are useful to us all the times. Some apps are more important than others — some have forced habits, and some were downloaded but never reminded to be used again. Like any other products, Mobile apps also face the ultimate challenge -- “adoption”. That’s the thought which should cross every mind every-time they are asked to develop a new mobile app.

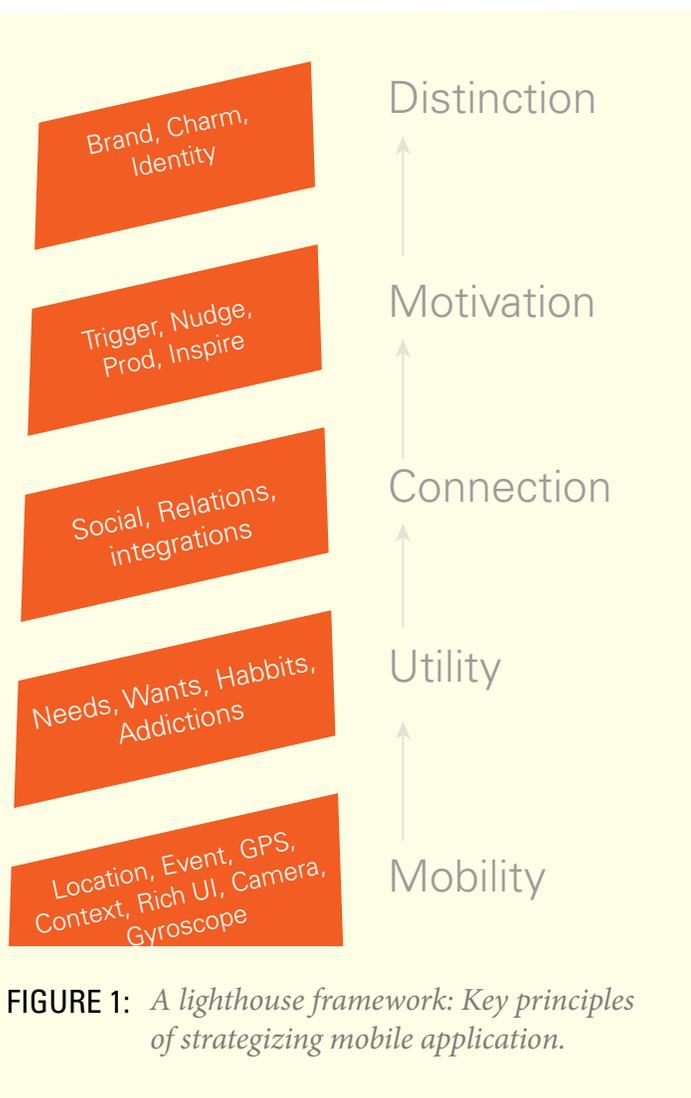
Design for mobile application requires research and strategy as any other channels do. Unfortunately, most of the mobile applications are result of me-to approach due to lack of a good research framework. They are just another version of their website and cause for more problems to their end users then giving them any improved experience.

Here’s my take on set of design principles that every businessperson commissioning an app, or an app designer on job must consider before embarking on design. These should help question why, what, and how to build the mobile app before you propose the design solution.

Average iPhone user has downloaded and played with 175 apps in one-year. But on average they use less than 12 apps per week. The usage of mobile application competes with many other substitutes. Thinking about what is the uniqueness of your mobile application is a great start when you are considering developing a mobile app., especially if your investment is going towards proliferated native app market.

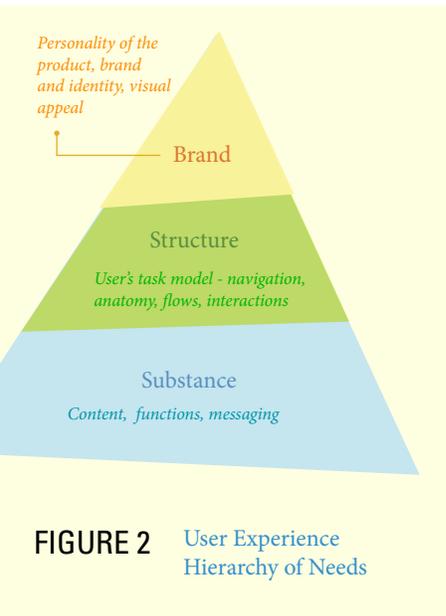
Here’s five things (as shown in Fig. 1) that helps me think through the problem during the ideation/discovery phase. This framework helps with various research work -- both users, market & environment to develop the idea.

Distinction - Most of the new ideas are developed by looking for inspirations within industry and checking our peers or competitors. This is an important part of the research, but drawing an exact mould for your product from your



competitors can be a very bad idea in mobile design. It is not uncommon to hear from stakeholders making an argument, "... because XYZ is doing this..." or questioning a perfectly innovative idea with, "...show me who is doing that...". These approaches dumb-down creativity and drive a product in a direction that hardly has any charm, distinction or merit for the end user.

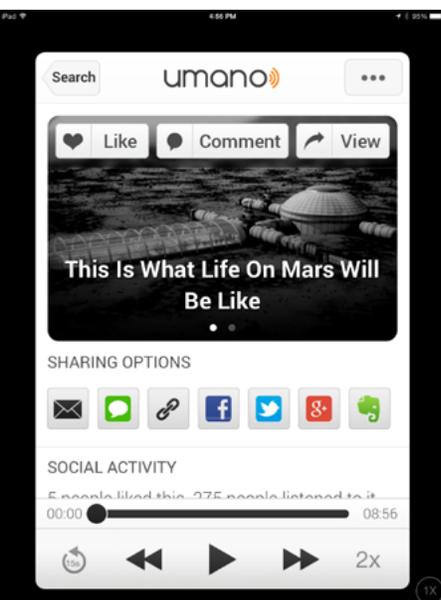
When it comes to mobile applications, it is even more important to differentiate your applications from rest of the available options. There are so many applications for similar use that if yours is just different, given everything else same, it will appeal to users. This is less about content but more important consideration when you derive it from the context. This is true in business context as it is for any B2C application — your App's longevity depends on not what it can do but most importantly how differently. This is especially strategic consideration for user experience. Most of the applications have reached parity on look and feel in this age — they all have beautiful design that interacts elegantly, they help jobs get done. The unique ones take that experience to next step by differentiation on each of the layers of User Experience (Ref. Figure 2).



Motivation -- Mobile applications face a tremendous challenge at the user's motivational front. The function of Mobile Application adoption is more related to how it motivates the users. Motivators when thought right can provide a unique power to personalize experience with cues, become part of habit and can drive user's actions. The motivations should be thought as different layer than the needs, wants and utility of the product. Even when a certain product meets certain needs, wants, utility they must involve elements that motivates the end user.

Most of the applications should understand context of use to motivate their users. Mobile users don't visit applications without a cue, push or a drive. Often these can be thought as an environmental cues, where users recall or needs the application based on the environment (Quick quiz -- when you get bored which application do you get to? And when you are driving to office? Or, when you are in toilet seat?). But also application can drive user's motivations by event based triggers -- such as reminders, updates, check-ins, etc. This will help the users to take note of and return to the application. Last but not the least, social features are the best to drive user's actions.

Consider an example of an app - **Umano**. My friend (and well-wisher :-)) helped me discover it. And I finally downloaded. Umano is not an App that I really needed. But it inculcated a habit in me -- whenever I am on a long drive, I put it on my car audio system and listen to all the articles. It has replaced NPR radio, Pandora, and iTunes from majority of my listening time-slots. How did Umano do it? It gently nudged me every morning with an article that I would love to listen without forcing me. It allowed me to bookmark them. Those are the once I tune in to when I am on the road. Umano also has the distinction over the articles curation as well. Their content is not highly time sensitive, but are quite irresistible when it surfaces on your phone as alert. As a behavior change, I have started playing Umano sometime in the morning when I am not



ready to jump back to my emails and start my work. That's the trigger Umano has created -- "when I am not ready to jump back to my emails and start my work" I remember Umano.

Connections -- Another important part of mobile application is to understand how to connect users with his social circle, environment or any other relations. These don't need to be limited to people, or applications on user's device, but can be extended to the other devices or hardware. This aspect can create a stickiness or a cue to use the application in connection with the others.



Consider **YouTube** Mobile App -- when I use this app at home to watch videos, it discovers my Apple TV and allows me to stream it on my big TV. This is a big connection that YouTube app has drawn between me, my TV and different rooms in my house.

There are many things mobile devices offer for better integration with the application — such as, calendar, address books, communication channels or user's profile information. Also, it's a good practice to integrate with user's preferred messaging tools - such as -- What'App, SMS, emails and leverage his address books for contact information. Using the same old personal information by the user that you use on the web application may not be suited for mobile context.

Utility -- Thinking about what will users do when they use your application is a very good idea. But this thought process has to go far beyond the value props, tangible gains and deeper into user's psych to understand the unique case for mobile use. This is due to the fact that use of mobile application involves very different attitude from its audience. When we talk about utility from Mobile Applications, it is catered towards the service the app is delivering. Often they are either content or the functions that help me do the job.

Mobile devices requires different tactics for delivering and leveraging content and features. It is not merely presenting the content that matters most but understanding how content is discovered, shared and consumed with context of mobility. Most of the mobile users have different attitude towards consuming content — they scan it faster and read lesser. This requires unique challenges to the editorial and curation of content. The same strategy for content that drives discovery and consumption of web content fails to get attention on mobile devices.

Mobility Features - When it comes to designing applications for mobile the decision between Mobile friendly site (aka responsive design) vs. native applications must be evaluated. If user can access the site by the browser, why would he/she be opening a native app to achieve the same goal?, should be the question that should be very well entertained.

GPS, camera, gyroscope, inApp notifications are some examples of the native devices that can be leveraged to provide superior functionality. If the content demands a rich interface it can be delivered far better experience with native applications. That said, it is important to question if the same features will retain the uniqueness to your mobile application over time as web and browsers becomes better with time. For example, if you are only leveraging just these functionality, HTML 5 is going to bring parity very soon. Some will argue that it has already arrived.

Case Study

This framework is to help expert analysis and draw the strategy for new mobile applications. To help provide a better working model I am presenting partial work of a heuristic analysis that I did for a financial mobile application. This analysis can reveal how this framework can be leveraged during discovery phase of any mobile application. The framework is used here to present a heuristic analysis of comparable set of mobile applications.

Goal:

Analyze some of the successful new apps and develop an understanding of what impacts the adoption of a mobile app. that are low on perceived “utility”, i.e. new product for which user has not expressed/realized the need.

By a quick survey among friends we selected four applications that don't really serve our regular needs and utility. These are the apps for which there are many more substitutes to fill the gap. It also means that if they were not made present, life will still go on :-). And that's why we selected them to learn what they do to well to become part of user's life.

	Distinction	Motivation	Connection	Utility	Mobility	Substitutes
	●●●○○	●●●○○	●●●○○	●○○○○	●●●●●	Pandora, YouTube iTunes, News Apps
	●●●●●	●●○○○	●●●○○	●●○○○	●●●●●	Facebook, Instagram Photo sharing apps
	●●○○○	●●○○○	●●●○○	●●○○○	●●●●●	Gift Apps Living Social, Groupon
	●●○○○	●●●○○	●○○○○	○○○○○	●●●●●	YouTube, Facebook

FIGURE 3 *All of these apps are low on utility. That's why it becomes even more important to understand how they work and create a space in users heart and mind. I would highly recommend these to try. In our case, for the financial app, the utility of the application is very high, but research suggests that users are intimidated (or call it not-motivated) to take action on their financial future.*

Conclusion

Any new app development opportunity is very exciting as well as challenging at a same point. It is very tempting to jump in and start building the product. During the development, or when have a product in your hand, the same level of synergy between business and development teams can be maintained by a very good work done up-front. Understanding the context of use is one such up-front activity that is key to plan work during and beyond the product development.

Mobile App development is proving to be the easier part. With so many great methodologies and tools, it is getting highly predictable, easy and cheaper by day. It is given that one has to have a great product, but that does not define the success. The most elusive part is adoption from the target users. It is becoming lesser and lesser a function of product features, and more of a layer that packages the product -- experience design and marketing. One can only get to that layer if they understand context of use of their application.

About Prady

Prady is UX consultant and advisor. He has helped many big organizations transform by adopting modern technologies. He has helped building new products and transform existing technologies to help business grow. He has led digital transformation of Sprint, Washington Post, World Bank, The Economist Group and many small and mid size firms.



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