

most significant bits

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SOCIAL MEDIA IN YOUR BUSINESS

by K. Alan Robbins

The Internet has become the center of the buying process for many products and services. In today's business conditions, understanding this new buying process is more important than ever.

THE CALL TO ACTION

Web sites used to be narrowly focused on awareness. Web site design was all about creativity—because the goal was to interrupt the browsing experience by catching the prospect's attention. Web sites didn't need a lot of content; Web site inventory was simply another form of advertising. The call to action directed the prospect to the sales force. Interacting with a sales person was how the consumer considered purchasing a product prior to the sale being made.

Today, there is an ever expanding volume of information available online. The Internet is the place where we all go to learn about the world and to explore the options available. A buyer's activities have moved away from the sales call and are almost entirely online. Today's customers use the Internet for research, not just for discovery.

The goal of your Web site is to educate the buyer during the consideration process using a simple, easy to read, content-centric format. Content is king. Content drives action. Superlative phrases consisting of adjectives layered on adjectives are not what prospects are interested in reading. They want real information they can use. They want to be educated. They crave knowledge. If you are not giving it to them, they will quickly go elsewhere.

Do you have clear calls to action, such as requesting more information or purchasing your product? Do you track how many prospects land on your site, how long they stay, and whether or not they perform the call to action? Not tracking site performance is akin to investing thousands of dollars in a certificate of deposit without knowing the interest rate—and hoping for a high rate of return.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Your Web site is only one part of successfully marketing your company online. The explosion of user-generated content in the form of message boards, forums, reviews, blogs, micro blogs and video means that any attempt to exclusively control the information about your company during the consideration phase is a lost cause. Unless you have a really boring product or service, someone has posted a message on a forum about it, or created a video of what it is like to use it, or mentioned it on Twitter. These people don't care about your corporate communications policy, regulatory environment, or non-disclosure agreements. You may have a fan site created by evangelical, enthusiastic customers. You may have a hate site just as enthusiastically created by a disgruntled customer or former employee.

You must actively monitor user-generated content. Google Alerts is one easy way to do this, and it is currently free. A weekly search of all the major social media search engines such as Technorati, Google Blog Search, Twingly, Digg, Reddit and so forth will alert you to the information your prospects are reading. When you find user generated content about your company, don't be passive. Engage in the conversation by stating your case in a respectful way. And don't forget to come back every few days in the event you ignite a debate.

The content that you create in the social media sphere is just as important as the content on your Web site. Unlike your Web site, where formal statements are presented, user-generated content is a conversation between ordinary people. You need to respond in a genuine, authentic and human way. Individuals have an innate distrust of institutions; on the social Web you are a person, not a corporate spokesperson.

If there is any amount of online chatter—good or bad—about your company, your management, your products, your services, you should

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NOTICES

STOUT SYSTEMS WELCOMES NEW EMPLOYEES
Gary Hayenga, Mark Koesel, Jeff Matson,
Ron Martin, Harry Pottash, Chris Weber
and Matt Wickey.

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DEVELOPING IPHONE APPS: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

By Gary Hayenga

WARNING: *The following article crosses the threshold of common English into geek speak. This article was written by, and for, software engineers.*

At the MacWorld Expo in January 2008, Apple CEO Steve Jobs announced a greatly anticipated event: at last Apple was going to allow third-party developers to write native iPhone applications!

When Apple started shipping its hot new smart phone in July 2007, the only applications that were allowed to run on it were Apple's own. Oh, there was the claim that it could run Web 2.0 applications—but these were just regular AJAX-enabled server side applications that would run in any Web browser, with the same limitations. Hardly things that could exploit the power and flexibility of an almost complete desktop operating system—a slightly modified version of the Mac OS X desktop operating system—running on a handheld device.

In late March of 2008 the first beta version of the native iPhone SDK was released, complete with a simulator for running the applications on the Mac. Apple began accepting applications for a limited number of beta developer licenses. When the App Store opened on July 11th (www.apple.com/iphone/appstore), Apple began approving applications for all developers, as long as they filled out their paperwork correctly and could be verified. Applications for licenses for a business, rather than an individual, continue to receive much more scrutiny and thus seem to take longer. This is mainly true for new businesses whose bona fides cannot easily be verified.

THE DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT

The iPhone SDK development tools require an Intel based Macintosh running Mac OS X 10.5 Leopard. The tools use Apple's XCode IDE and (optionally) the Interface Builder GUI design tool. The Cocoa Touch frameworks—and thus iPhone applications—require the code to be written in the Objective-C language. Objective-C is a strict superset of C,

which means that it can run C and C++ code, which is very handy. But any interaction with the iPhone OS APIs has to be done using the Objective-C syntax which looks very different and takes quite a bit of imagination to wrap your mind around for most people—even if they're familiar with Object Oriented programming and design.

For instance here are two lines of code that declare and initialize two strings:

```
NSString *currentFolder = [[NSString alloc]
initWithString:[NSUserDefaults standardUserDefaults]
objectForKey:kCURRENT_BOOKMARK_FOLDER]];

NSString *currentNotesFolder =
    [self fixSqlQuotes:[NSString alloc]
initWithString:[NSUserDefaults standardUserDefaults]
stringForKey:kCURRENT_NOTES_FOLDER]]];
```

Notice the multiple sets of nested brackets. Each bracket contains a “message” being sent to a “receiver” object. The items after the colons are parameters that may themselves be values returned by messages sent to other objects that return a value or another object reference. In this case these are creating string objects that are having memory allocated for them, and then their value is being initialized to the string contained in the standardUserDefaults dictionary with the key equal to the given string constant.

ALLOWED APP CONTENT

Many stories about Apple's screening process for iPhone apps have been told in the press and on the Web, some true and some not so true. Apple's basic reasoning is to enhance their users' experience and confidence by making sure that third party applications meet their guidelines for dependable user experience. Additionally all applications

must meet certain general criteria, some designed for security, some for Apple's brand image, and some for contractual limitations that Apple has with other parties.

Examples of restrictions include: no pornography, nothing that drains the battery excessively, nothing that uses excessive bandwidth (on the cellular network, thus there are certain applications that are WiFi only), and several others.

Most restrictions are designed to keep the user experience pleasant and Apple's iPhone brand squeaky clean. It's an evolving standard. Case in point: early in the process the App Store rejected applications that made annoying bodily noises. If you have any knowledge about the recent top 10 entertainment apps you know that policy has changed.

But other restrictions have been a product of Apple's concern about competition. For instance, Apple wasn't sure about how to handle Web browser submissions that would compete with its own Mobile Safari browser. Recently the decision was made to approve third party WebKit based browsers.

The remaining restrictions are more technical.

1. For security purposes—to prevent malicious or inept programmers from illicitly accessing or modifying things they shouldn't.
2. No third party applications are permitted to run in the background—although Apple's can and do—otherwise a non-technical user may end up with a bunch of apps running in the background eating up CPU cycles, making everything sluggish and draining the battery rapidly. Apple doesn't want users unable to make phone calls because their batteries mysteriously only last an hour.
3. Third party applications are also confined to their own internal sandbox. Files and settings for one application cannot be accessed or changed by any other, except for specific Apple APIs, which provide the ability to access the central photo database and address book contents.

APP REVIEW AND APPROVAL

To prevent non-approved applications—which may contain malicious content, or be ineptly programmed, or (most important to developers) be pirated—from being installed on the iPhone, Apple requires that each application be code signed. Using Apple's online tools, a registered developer must generate a distribution provisioning file from his or her account. The provisioning files must then be copied into the XCode project and compiled into the finished app binary. This makes all apps traceable back to their originators. Additionally, it prevents the app from running if any changes have been made to it after it was compiled.



After the app is compiled with the appropriate code signing provisioning files, it gets uploaded to the App Store along with screenshots, icons and text descriptions of the app for display in the App Store. The app is then put into the review process. This may take anywhere from two days to six weeks, depending on the complexity of the application and how many applications are currently in the queue for review. Unfortunately, and maddeningly, Apple will not tell developers what that wait time might be, or even if they will lose their place in line if they find and fix a bug and then submit a new binary. Thus some developers have had an app rejected for a simple bug within two days of submission, fixed the bug and resubmitted the new binary within the day, and then waited six more weeks for a fairly simple application to be approved for sale.

As Apple becomes more comfortable dealing with the security of the phone and third party applications, most of the limitations will probably relax. The long approval process, however, may well continue as there has been no evidence that it is hindering third party development. With 17 million iPhones and even more iPod Touches already sold, 22,000 applications available for download from the App Store and over a billion apps already downloaded, Apple doesn't really have any cause for concern.

Gary Hayenga has been a full-time Mac developer for the past 10 years. He was accepted very early into the iPhone beta developer program and has several apps of his own available on the App Store as well as consulting on numerous others. He joined the staff of Stout Systems in 2009. Email garyhayenga@stoutsystems.com.

give serious consideration to empowering these individuals to have these conversations on your company Web site. Facilitating and encouraging authentic two-way conversations online with your customers and prospects sends a clear message that you are trustworthy, transparent, authentic, genuine and fair. Who wouldn't want to buy from a company with those attributes? (The only exception would be those products and services where the information on your site could expose you to significant liability or regulatory compliance challenges.)

Hosting a product forum where comments are screened before they are posted—or having a negative comment show up one day only to disappear the next—sends the clear message that you cannot be trusted and probably have something to hide. Your customers realize that the reality of doing business is that a few customers will complain no matter what.

THE TAKE AWAY

A simple, easy to use Web site—packed with useful educational content that doesn't blast

the user with interruption-based advertising messages—combined with a positive, genuine presence in the social media space will accrue a significant return on your marketing investment dollar. Proper analytics will help you to measure that return and finely hone your Web inventory into a laser-focused tool that converts leads in prospects, and prospects into sales. Even if you're not doing these things, you can be assured that your competitors are.

K. Alan Robbins is a Solutions Architect with Stout Systems. Alan has more than twenty-five years' experience selling, designing, developing, and managing the development of midsized to enterprise class software applications and websites. Email alanrobbins@stoutsystems.com.

SO YOU WANT TO BE A CONSULTANT?

by John W. Stout

For a number of years I have been giving a talk titled So You Want to be a Consultant? Most recently, I had the pleasure of giving that talk at TechTown—Detroit's growing business incubator and networking organization.

I've noticed an interesting pattern: when companies do large layoffs, they inevitably fall behind in their production schedules. That opens the door to consulting and

entrepreneurship opportunities within those companies that might not have existed before. So it seems natural that consulting and entrepreneurship getting more attention in the current business environment.



I've been in the software consulting and staffing business for many years, and have had my share of experiences facing and overcoming the tribulations that come with running one's own business. A lot of my experiences are specific to the technology business, but most of those apply to any form of consulting. At least half of one's success as a consultant depends on a good grasp and application of basic business knowledge and I am happy to share that with people. See <http://slideshare.net/StoutSystems>.

John W. Stout is the founder and president of Stout Systems. With 30 years' experience in the computer industry in a variety of roles, he is an advocate of the effective communication of technology issues and objectives. Email john@stoutsystems.com.



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