



Mobile App Development: How to Create a Useful App

Author

Bethany Poole

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These days, it's easy to get caught up in cool, new technology and mobile apps while forgetting about the user. Bethany Poole, group marketing manager at Google, shares how her team focused on user-centric design to create Primer – an app that teaches marketing strategies in fewer than five minutes.

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How do you create a useful mobile app? First step: Consider not doing a mobile app at all. As the team behind the creation of the Google Primer app, that's not easy for us to say, because we love technology. We love creating new products, we love innovation, and we love anything that's cutting edge.

Obviously, we're not alone in this love affair. Right now, the Google Play store alone has over 1.6 million mobile apps, with many more launching each day. And brands everywhere keep creating new apps—many of which use new, shiny technology like geolocation, virtual reality, near field communication, and augmented reality. However, sometimes the newest and shiniest things are also the most blinding. We like them because they get a lot of buzz, impress award show judges, and make our brand (and us as marketers) seem trendy and relevant. But there's an inherent danger to all this.

While we might be creating a “cool” app, we're not necessarily offering a valuable solution for users. So even if the product is slick and well-designed and gets a lot of downloads at first, it could be old news two weeks later. Users will have abandoned it. The press will have moved on. Our business goals won't be met nor have we helped our target audience in any significant way.

This siren song of technology is something our team struggled with when we first started working on our app—an educational tool that helps startups, small business owners, and advertisers learn marketing with five-minute interactive lessons.

Of course, we didn't initially set out to create a mobile app. We merely wanted to solve a problem for our users: They wanted to learn new skills and keep up with the latest marketing trends, but it was difficult for them to find the time.

During our early brainstorming, we struggled with our desire to be innovative groundbreakers and thought leaders. This sent us in several directions. For example: “What if we created a virtual teaching assistant to accompany our lessons? Could we have online ‘office hours’ where

teachers would be available 24/7?" All of our ideas took advantage of technological advancements but ultimately felt like innovation for innovation's sake, without any meaning or value.

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We realized that we had put the proverbial cart before the horse. We had to stop thinking about what we wanted to produce in the end, and start thinking about what our target audience needed right now.

The importance of user-centric design

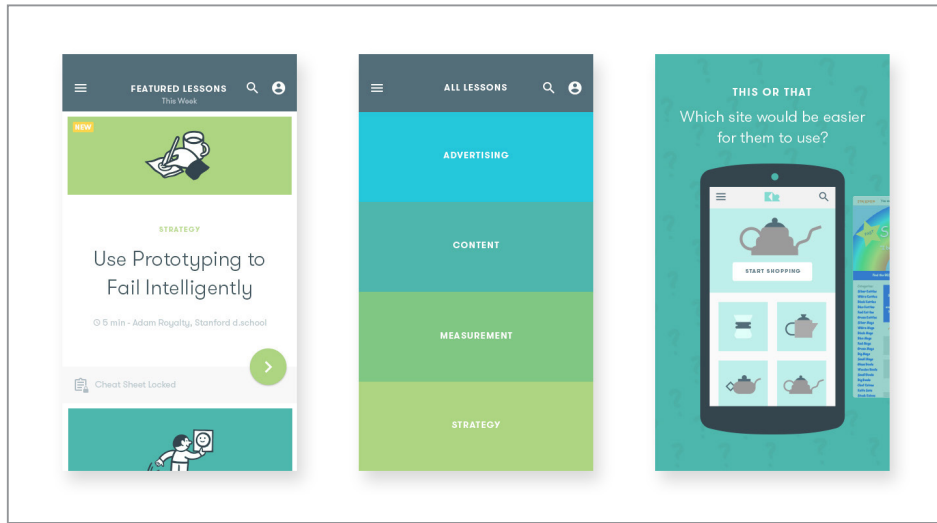
To create something useful, we had to be user-first.

So we started researching our target audience and their habits more thoroughly. We found out that 97% of U.S. adults over age 25 don't spend any time learning new skills during their day.¹ We asked our users to find out why.

At first, we received the obvious answers about lack of time and frustration with learning options. We kept digging until we landed on a deeper user insight: People viewed education as something so far removed from their everyday lives that they found it difficult to get into a learning mindset.

That meant our platform couldn't disrupt users' lives. Rather, it needed to be useful to them in moments they were most open to learning something new.

That is, we had to reach them when they had tiny pockets of downtime-like when they were waiting for a meeting to start or standing in line for coffee. And what were people doing in those moments? Looking at their phones.



This helped us decide: If we wanted Primer to be useful for our particular audience, it had to be a mobile app.

However, if our user research had told us that a website or a classroom seminar would be the most useful, we would have done that instead ... because the user's needs comes first and the medium second.

How to prioritize usability in design

Our user-centric thinking guided us even as we began developing our app, and taught us how true innovation happens when usability informs technology. This—along with a deep dive into the principles of mobile app design—helped us take the right steps to design and promote our app in a way that was relevant to our target audience, including:

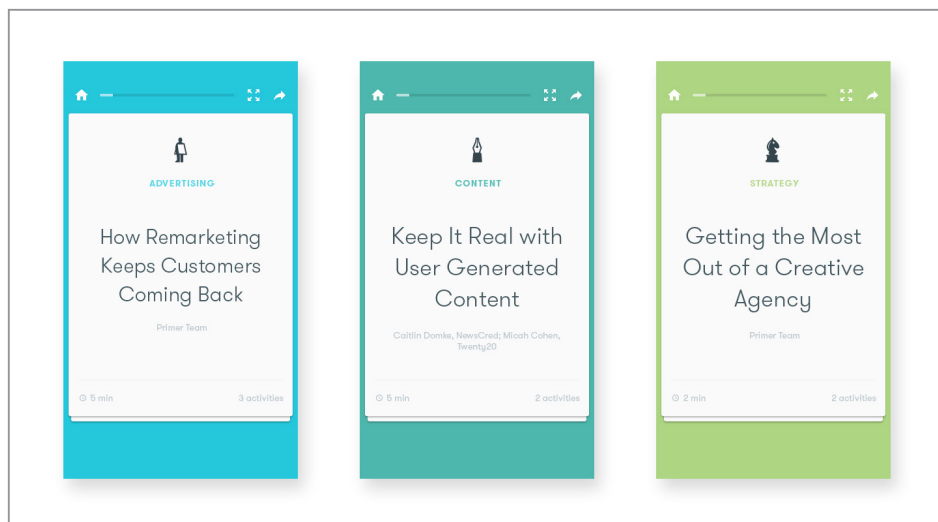
1. **Think like the user, then design the UX.** Initially, we had an incredible amount of ideas for Primer features. It was overwhelming ... until we let the users' needs guide us. We theorized that people coming to the app would fall into three types: active users who'd want to find specific lessons quickly, curious users who'd want to learn something new but haven't settled on a topic yet, and passive users who'd have no intent at all and just want to browse the app.

Primer's UX had to be useful for all three types. We added search functionality so active users could find exactly what they came for,

grouped lessons into generalized categories like “Advertising” and “Content” to help curious users zero in on a topic, and included a “Featured” section that bubbled up five recommended lessons for passive users.

- 2. Remember that users are people, not demographics.** Our app is a B2B tool, so we used business-centric demographics like company size or industry to determine who our users would be. This caused us to focus only on the startup community at first, which made sense because this group was thirsty for new marketing skills and knew exactly what they needed to learn (meaning they would be in the easy-to-reach active user group). However, after we launched and tested our minimum viable product (MVP), we saw that our user base had organically grown to include professionals at big brands. Although these users fell more into the curious or passive groups, they still shared the same entrepreneurial mindset as our startup audience.

Because we’d relied solely on business demographics, we hadn’t considered this other audience and had forgotten that we were solving a problem for people, not companies. So, we redefined our audience to be entrepreneurial marketers in any type of business and made sure our UX worked harder to help this larger audience explore and discover new lesson topics.



- 3. When promoting an app, consider all the situations in which it could be useful.** On the surface, Primer is an app that answers people's marketing questions. An easy promotional strategy, then, would have been to put Primer in the moments people have these business questions, like buying search ads for queries such as, "What does CLV mean?"

But, we realized that many users viewed Primer as a way to pass the time without wasting time. This opened up a whole new set of marketing opportunities. We looked for moments where people had a lot of free time and desired a worthwhile distraction, like the holidays, and launched targeted online ad campaigns during those time periods.

- 4. Keep working on the utility of the app even after launch.** We knew that a combination of acquisition and retention would be the key to Primer's growth. For acquisition, we used content marketing and paid media to get downloads. Retention, though, ended up being a different challenge. To help, we've used re-engagement strategies like email and notifications. But the most important retention strategy we've implemented is UX improvements, i.e., making sure our app becomes increasingly useful and relevant to our audience.

In the end, our user-centric design helped our B2B app succeed beyond what we had originally hoped for. After only six months, Primer had 650,000+ downloads, 80,000+ hours spent in-app, and an average 4.5-star user rating on both the App Store and Google Play.

As we continue to develop other products that will help our target audience, we often ask ourselves whether every new update or idea should be mobile-first. The answer is always: Maybe. As long as it's useful to our audience.

Sources

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey, 2014.