

Feature

Five steps to a successful mobile strategy for the travel industry

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Glenn Gruber, associate vice president of market development and travel technologies at Ness Technologies, discusses the growing importance of mobile capability in the travel industry, and outlines actions companies can take to create and implement a successful mobile strategy.

The mobile communications sector is red-hot. Increasingly, mobile is the primary method in which consumers engage with brands, consume and create information and purchase goods and services.

The travel industry is no exception. Mobile devices can be used in all phases of the travel lifecycle, from researching flight prices to confirming hotels. PhoCusWright, the specialist research firm for the travel industry, recently reported that 35% of mobile users intend to book travel on their phones in the coming year.

PhoCusWright's "Traveller Technology Survey" found that travellers are using - and plan to use - their mobile phones for a variety of activities. The question is, will the travel industry be ready to meet, engage and convert these users when they're ready?

Ness Software Product Labs has created a five-step programme for its customers to guide companies in developing and implementing their own successful mobile strategy.

1) Identify the customer need

While mobile is a critical channel, simply creating a mobile app or website is not a strategy. If you are planning to develop new software, then you have to understand specifically what your target customer wants to do with his or her mobile device and whether that comports with your objectives. For example, travellers are likely to conduct the bulk of their primary research (where to go, where to stay, how to get there and what to do) during the trip planning phase on their desktops or laptops. Post booking and while travelling, however, they are more likely to rely on their mobile devices for communications regarding itinerary changes, alerts and dinner reservations.

As such, the kind of information you present and how you present it may differ depending on the platform and the context of the interaction. While people researching their travel can receive a lot of text, high-resolution images and video, the material you give the mobile traveller may need to be much more streamlined and transactional in nature, although the advent of 3G/4G networks and HD-quality displays such as Apple's Retina Display and AMOLED displays are opening up opportunities for high-resolution images and video in mobile communications.

Start by considering the following questions:

- What are the gaps in current communication and interaction channels? Sometimes this can be as simple as alerts for flight delays, reminders for a spa appointment or information about activities or special events.

- What changes in behaviour do you want to achieve? Are you trying to influence buying behaviour (up-sell/cross-sell), or to reduce operational costs via self-service?

- Complex versus spur-of-the-moment decisions. It is essential to understand the complexity of the decision process involved in the action you want to enable. You need to determine whether the activity is even appropriate for mobile, and to understand what depth of information needs to be presented to move someone to action. This can be influenced by the number of options including, timing, how critical the decision, and the cost.

- Will security concerns be an issue? Making a dinner reservation typically does not require the presentation of any payment information, so there is no psychological hurdle to overcome. While most people accessing the mobile web or using apps on a smartphone are accustomed to providing their credit cards over the Internet, however, surveys show that they are less accustomed to doing so over mobile devices, so fears of having credit card or personal identification information stolen over the air, although mostly unfounded, are higher.

- Do you want to integrate social and location-based services? If there's a hotter segment than mobile today, it's social networking and location-based services. If they're check-in based services tied to rewards like Facebook Places, Foursquare, or Gowalla, you may want to consider how to incorporate location and social networking into your application.

- Do not lose sight of your brand. It's very important to ensure that you provide a consistent representation of your brand over every channel, including mobile. If you have an upscale brand with a utilitarian mobile app, the psychological dissonance may negatively impact usage and conversion rates.

2) Which devices will you support?

Once you know what you want your mobile presence to accomplish, you need to determine which platforms and devices you want to support and how you're going to prioritise your efforts. There are over a hundred phones available for sale at any given point in time. Which ones are your customers most likely to use? Which ones can deliver the experience you want? This is important because of the wide variety of parameters to consider within each device:

Start by considering the demographics of your target audience:

- Business or consumer users? The market share of devices and platforms varies greatly. Business user smartphone adoption rates are off the charts relative to consumers; BlackBerry still has a significantly higher business than consumer share, although Apple and Android adoption is rising quickly.



- **Geography** matters because there is significant skew in adoption and mobile operating system market share by geographic region. Some businesses cater to customers in specific locations, while others target customers globally. For instance, Nokia's Symbian OS has a virtual monopoly in Africa and a strong position in other developing regions, but close to zero penetration in North America, whose Smartphone market is dominated by Apple, Android-based devices, and RIM's Blackberry.

3) Evaluate Technology Options

Having narrowed down the list of devices that you want to support, there are still some technology decisions to be made.

There are two primary strategies for delivering content to your customers over mobile devices; "App-centric" or "Mobile Web-centric".

- **App-centric:** here you develop apps that are specific to a device, supporting its particular hardware capabilities such as cameras, microphones, Bluetooth or GPS.
- **Mobile Web-centric:** this method is device-agnostic; it uses existing web technologies, developed for use on mobile devices. The advantage is that most mobile browsers can support it, but it depends on a constant connection to the Internet so is not a good fit for all cases. Most smartphones use Webkit-based browsers which makes development and presentation more consistent, but keep in mind that not all Webkit implementations are the same. And keep in mind that most feature phone browsing experiences still leave a lot to be desired.

Even after you've made that decision, there are many technical decisions to be made as well (e.g. do you want to leverage multiplatform development frameworks and tools like Sencha, PhoneGap or Kony Solutions, Flash v. HTML5). These decisions, amongst others can materially impact development time, costs and performance.

You also need to consider what limitations your existing software systems (Internet Booking Engines, PMS, CRS) may impose on your plans and how you will integrate with those systems.

4) Plan your roadmap

Whatever route you choose, you want to ensure a perfect experience every time. If you're successful, tens of thousands or possibly millions of people will be accessing your app every month. If it doesn't work revenues are at stake, as is your customer's opinion of you.

Just because you create an initial vision for your mobile presence, you are not done. Far from it. As a prospect said to me the other day, "mobile operates in dog years". What you do today, may not be right a month from now and likely look dated in just 6 months. You cannot begin a down the mobile path thinking that this is a one-time effort. You must plan to continually update your mobile offerings.

Over time you will want to add new features and new marketing offers. Whether it's an application update or just new content on the mobile website, when these changes are made they will go live to ALL of your customers at the same time. In today's social network connected world, any failures are amplified to existing and potential customers very quickly. Don't just fear the #FAIL hash tag; plan to avoid it by using a structured product management and development methodology:

- Be agile; don't wait for "the big release"

Because mobile marketing is so fluid and is evolving so quickly, you need to be in a position to adapt to changes in your users' behaviours, and their adoption of new technologies and platforms (e.g. Facebook Places), as well as to competitive changes in the marketplace.

5) Analyse and Adjust

As your mobile app and mobile strategy evolves, your roadmap shouldn't be static. There are a number of tools and metrics to use that will help you evaluate whether or not you're achieving your objectives. Some of the questions you should be asking are:

- How many people are downloading the app?
- How often are people logging in and using it?
- Is anything changing in the customer base?
- Analysis of usage—where, when, what features are most popular?
- Are you meeting your up-sell/cross-sell or revenue objectives?
- Have there been changes in customer satisfaction or sentiment?
- What are my conversion rates?

As more information comes in, it should immediately be evaluated and fed back into your development plan so you can readjust accordingly. These fundamental details will enable you to create a roadmap to build your product, a crucial step to ensure your mobile strategy is adaptable as technology evolves.

Ness Software Product Labs is a Ness global service line that provides software product expertise—from concept through development to market support—delivered via collaborative "extended product labs." Ness operates software R&D labs for more than 50 ISVs and other product-oriented clients, using its technology centres across India and Central and Eastern Europe, along with onsite and local presence in North America, Europe, Israel and Asia Pacific. To learn more about Ness Software Product Labs in the travel industry, please visit www.ness.com/travel.