market research bulletin

SURVEY

The **APP** is Where It's **At**

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the Right Sample Ingredients

Concept
Testing **&** the **"Uniqueness"** Paradox

Why Hybrid, **Why Now?**

Don't Touch
That Dial

Kristin Luck
Presdent, Decipher, Inc.

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The App is Where It's At

Untethering Online Communities in a Multi-touch World

By;
Greg Heist, Vice President,
Research Innovation - Gongos Research

Joyce Salisbury, Senior Manager,
Global Market Research–New Methods - GM

01 The very DNA of our industry is being disrupted

by a technological trend we call the smartphone. But if you think about it, the smartphone isn't just a cool gadget. It's connecting and engaging us in new ways, and one could say it's changing us as a society. To borrow a hypothesis from anthropologist Amber Case, the smartphone is a catalyst of our evolution as a species. She believes it's becoming an externalized portion of our brain. And if a piece of technology is becoming that integral to our lives, as researchers, we need to pay very close attention to it.

Beyond this

2011 is an important tipping point for this technology in that smartphones will outsell feature phones in the U.S. for the first time. So while we're witnessing this exponential growth, one of the fundamental reasons why smartphones are being adopted so quickly is the notion of apps. The explosion of the app-verse (from 10 million apps downloaded upon the opening of Apple's App Store in July 2008 to 10 billion in January 2011) is staggering in itself. And it's not happening because it's a fad. It's happening for a reason. Ten months ago, Wired Magazine wrote a telling article about why apps have gained so much traction. Included was the quote, "The screen comes to [consumers]; they don't have to go to the screen." Simply put, app-based platforms better fit into consumer's lives, and isn't that exactly where we want to be as researchers?

Why develop an app?

Mobile-enabled communities will change the research game in a number of ways, namely increased responsiveness, vivid real-time feedback, and deeper engagement. In fact, a female member using our i°Communities mobile app can now engage with her community while she's with her toddler. Not having to tuck away to her home office in the basement means she can check community happenings far more often, and with an ease that a mom can appreciate.

From our perspective, a mobile app was the logical way to extend the research community experience. Here are reasons why:

01 An app is the only way to truly mirror the online community experience, which includes the ability to conduct dialogues and surveys.

02 Uploading photos and videos from a smartphone is far more seamless than transferring them from a digital camera to your computer.

03 An app allows us to leverage one gateway to access multiple communities.

04 As an open-ended platform, apps offer the opportunity to add more powerful features in the future.

App-based communities and consumers

Developing the app was one thing

learning how to use it was another. GM wanted to understand what works and what doesn't when using an app for an existing community of 1,400 Gen Yers, ages 16 to 29. Based on early member experiences, below are some of the learnings:

01 There was an expectation that all community activities were going to be mobile-enabled. Consumers can get frustrated if too many exercises cannot be completed through the app.

02 There was a general lack of understanding among members about the app's capabilities and features. Despite our best efforts to describe the functionalities, we found we had to integrate a tutorial as part of the introductory process.

03 Typing lengthy responses on a smartphone can be frustrating. Compared to the 100-120 word responses in a traditional online community, mobile responses were typically in the range of 60 words. That said, those responses were very well-thought out.

04 It takes additional encouragement from moderators to entice members to include photos and video in their responses.

App-based research and organizational learning

A key to relieving organizational concerns of using new technology is to educate cross-functional teams. With early Internet research, we spent a lot of time convincing executives that it wasn't a 16-year-old kid online pretending to be a 45-year-old woman. But with mobile research, GM leadership actually approached our research team and asked us to investigate it first. That was a good and a bad thing. They came with grand ideas of what mobile research could do. Instead, we started building a foundation within the organization by saying, "We're going to start small, and we're going to start safe. We're going to increase the functionality, but we're going to start with something that we're confident in." Then, we could branch out to some of the more interesting things that the smartphone technology allows.

When we got the link to our first mobile survey at GM, we all looked at each other and asked, "Does anyone have an iPhone so we can test it?" And we realized that we didn't have the appropriate technology. But we needed to get it, and we did. We will certainly have to keep updating our access to technology to keep pace with what consumers are using.

We then had to decide what we should do with a mobile app rather than what we can do. Privacy issues, for example. You can go out in the driveway and take pictures of your neighbor's vehicle or all the vehicles in a parking lot, but do we really want to put people in that situation? And as an auto company we have the issue of, "Do I want consumers answering surveys in their vehicles while driving down the expressway at 60 miles per hour?" We needed to be very careful.

Pictures "from the road"

What really excites us as an automotive manufacturer is— you're now in the vehicle or in the location where we want the research to happen. Where you can't put your Escalade next to your computer and fill out the survey, you can bring your phone into your Escalade. So that's very exciting for us. Before this, our only option was to bring respondents to a location clinic and have them bring their own vehicle.

There's also a visual piece to a mobile research app that's very unfiltered. One person's idea of a clean and organized vehicle is very different from another's. When you actually get to see their vehicle in pictures and video, it gives you a clear understanding. Those pictures and video can help immerse the organization into the lives of the consumer without a dozen PowerPoint slides.

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The universal implications of apps

Reachability is a very important component in research – particularly global research. We had a research community in Australia that never achieved the same participation rates as other communities. People there didn't seem as interested in sitting at home and answering surveys. So there's this idea that if we start to look at mobile communities as opposed to online communities, we could increase our reach and number of respondents.

There's also an opportunity to improve the validity of respondents. At my own home, I have five computers and six email addresses. But most people in the world have one cell phone number. It's much easier to tie a person to a cell phone than to tie them to an email address or even a computer. So we're very excited about global implications—both in getting the consumers we want and making sure they're truly engaged.

The Future

The future is an exciting one in the area of research apps for a number of reasons.

First, leveraging GPS capabilities for location-based research is still in its infancy. By linking where a consumer is at any given moment regarding an idea or reaction (to an in-store merchandise display, for example), we can provide more realistic context to the research.

Barcode scanning could potentially be used in two ways: QR codes for launching surveys and UPC codes for gathering detailed shopping and purchase behaviors. Applications such as these will enable us to tie real-time insights to either specific products or real-world stimuli.

Finally, the idea of gamification shows promise for mobile research. On one level, we can make the research process more enticing and engaging for consumers by making activities more game-like. On a more ambitious level, actual research game interfaces can be developed where we can learn how consumers make decisions and trade-offs based on the way they play.

But beyond these three opportunities to take mobile research to the next level, there's a very significant generational factor at play here. The multi-touch interface—the bedrock of all smart devices—is the technological baseline of the newest generation of consumers. Just like "digital natives" have never known a world without the Internet, the "Multi-touch Generation" (children under the age of 5) will have never known a world without this interface.

My son, Jack, who just turned two-years old, is a great example of this. If you watch the video, (below) pay close attention to how intuitively he interacts with an iPad. If we envision the not-so-distant future of research, we will clearly need to factor in this new way of interfacing with information.

Video
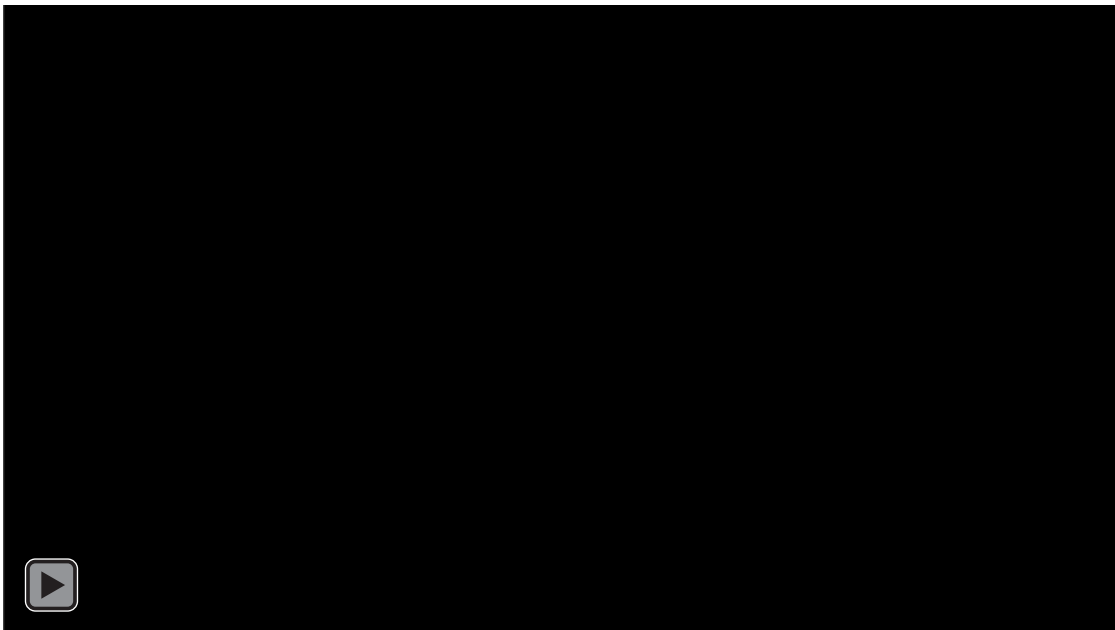
I would love to think that Jack is a prodigy. But he is actually quite typical of millions and millions of kids in this generation. This is their primal technological imprint, and the implications of this shift are only now beginning to be felt.

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