

An abstract illustration featuring a central black smartphone with a glowing orange screen. The phone is surrounded by several concentric, thin orange elliptical orbits. Various elements are placed along these orbits: a small black sphere, a larger orange sphere, a small orange sphere, and a black speech bubble with three horizontal lines. Additionally, there are four starburst shapes, each composed of multiple thin orange lines radiating from a central point. The background is a dark, textured gradient of black and dark grey.

A Strategic Guide to Leveraging Mobile App Channel

When to build a mobile app, why yours doesn't convert as expected, and what can you do about it?

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Introduction

Since the dawn of trade, businesses have faced a similar challenge: how to effectively reach and engage their clients. Of course, the possibilities exploded in the digital era, but like everything, your options are limited by your business and the return on investment. Some channels will be super effective, but expensive, others will return little traffic for little investment.



What if you could have a relatively inexpensive way to always be with your users and be able to remind them about your product whenever you believe it will be most effective? That is essentially a mobile app, if done right, and the direct line to your users isn't a highway of spammy messages.

But, like with other broadcast channels, mobile apps aren't a stellar, universal solution for everybody, and there might be a relatively high bar of entry, with investment in a team, regardless of whether it's internal or agency. So, how to get started? Is the app a good solution for your company? That is the focus for this ebook, and we here at Appunite hope to help you make the right choice.

However, before we jump into the topic fully, let's review all the available communication channels so that the landscape of possibilities is fully understood.

Understanding First-Time vs. Repeated Communication

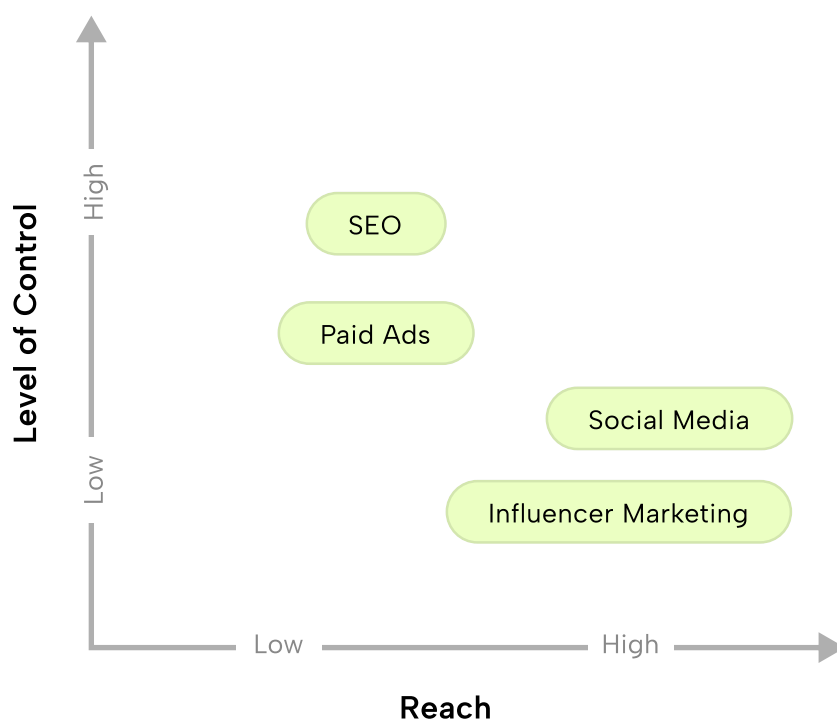
It's important to understand the basic message distinction, which is pretty similar to one of the oldest sales sayings in the sales playbook:

Upsell is always easier than the initial sell.

With messaging, it's slightly different, as it's about first getting your potential lead to somehow learn about your product, so that this person can actually become a lead that has a real possibility to convert to a paying customer. Thus, we can divide the communication into two phases, each with dedicated tools.

First-Time Communication: Delegated and Indirect

When reaching new audiences, businesses typically rely on the following delegated communication channels:



► Social Media

Here, you are leveraging platform algorithms and social proof to reach potential customers through shared content and targeted advertising. Between this and the next point, you can also distil the growing market of influencer marketing.

► Paid Advertising

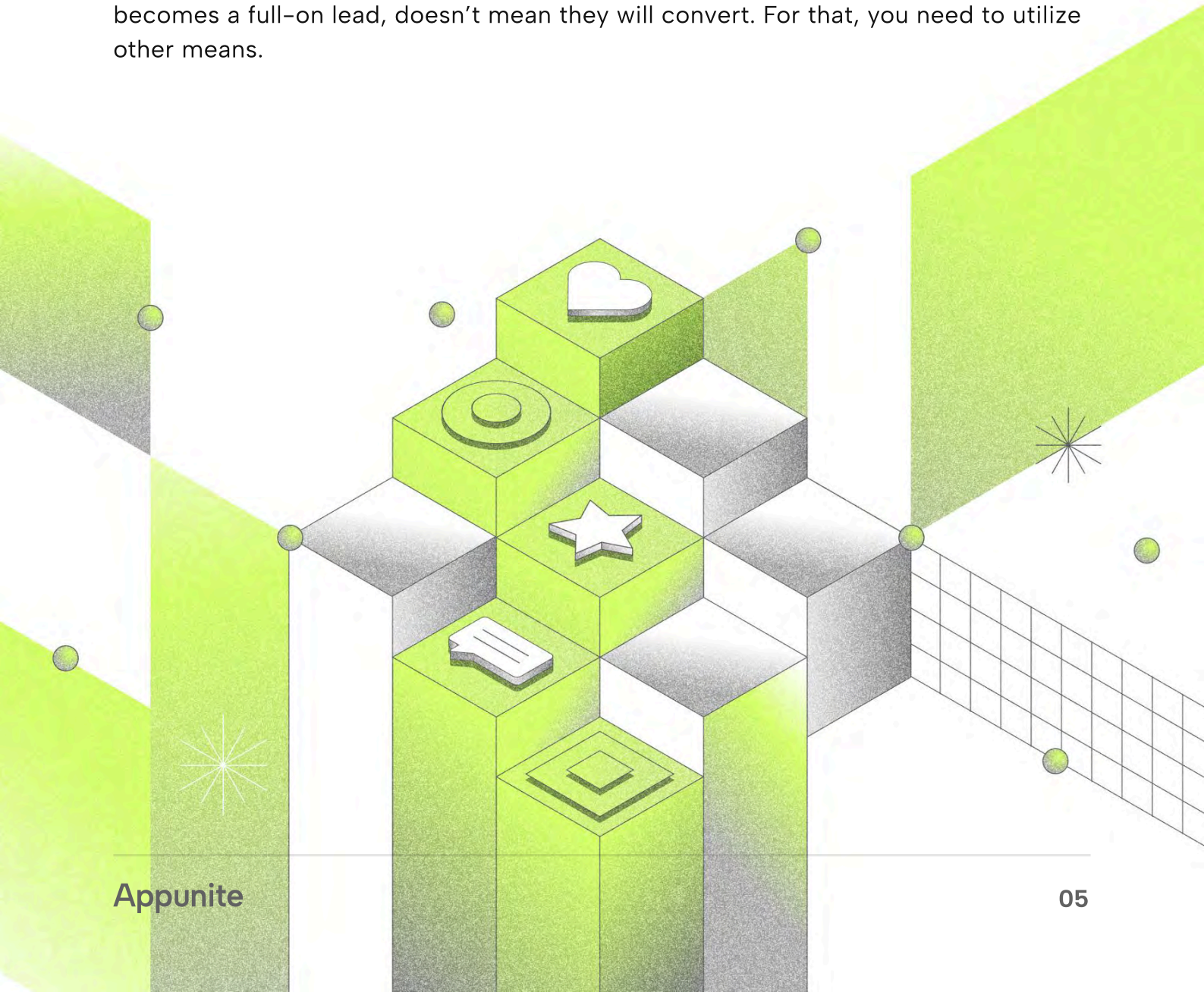
Your advertising bread and butter with platforms like Google Ads, Facebook Ads, or display networks to capture attention and drive initial interest. Unlike classical paper/poster advertisers, rather than shooting blindly in hopes of finding a client, in the current age, you can decide on your audience and only show the ad to people most likely interested in your product.

► SEO and Content Marketing

By this phrase, we mean creating discoverable content that attracts users through search engines and establishes authority in your domain. We can be honest and admit that the ebook you are reading is an example of this type of client search. It's basically an exchange of knowledge for a potential lead.

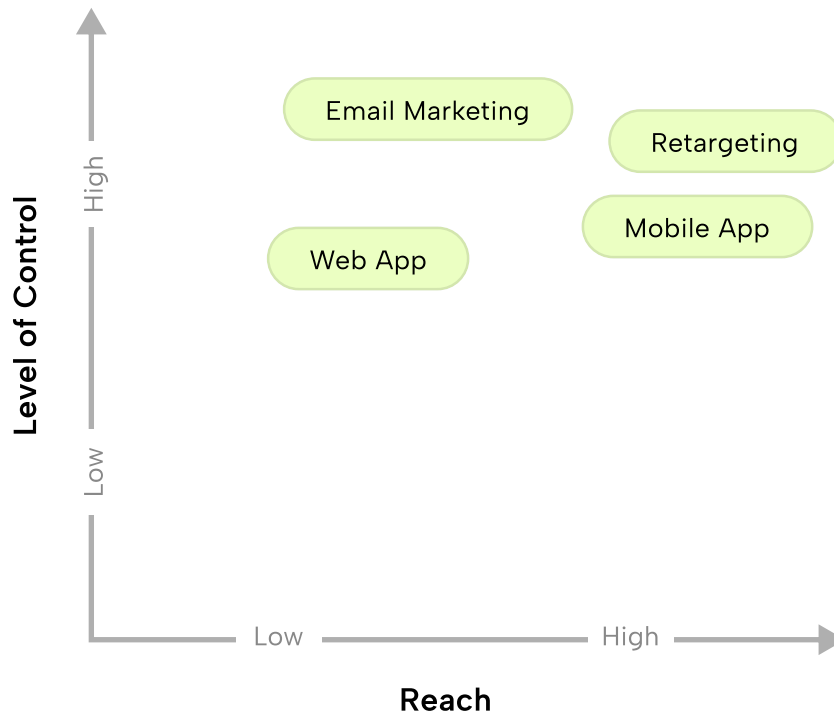
These channels are excellent for initial discovery but come with severe limitations. You don't own the relationship; algorithm changes can devastate reach overnight, and costs typically increase over time as competition intensifies. Digital ad costs have already skyrocketed, bringing more attention to SEO content generation.

Moving on, getting the potential lead informed of your brand, even when the person becomes a full-on lead, doesn't mean they will convert. For that, you need to utilize other means.



Repeated Communication: Owned and Direc

For ongoing engagement with existing users, the most effective channels are those you control:



► Email Marketing

This is your direct communication to subscribers who have explicitly opted in to hear from you. This channel never converted like crazy, but in recent years, it was additionally hampered by privacy protection laws. Still, the best entry channel in terms of costs, but building a converting email list has never been as challenging as these days.

► Retargeting

Those ads are specifically that already learned about your product, and you can capitalize on that and the little data you already know about your lead. Retargeting ads often see click-through rates up to 10× higher than standard display ads¹.

► Web Apps

This is a type of tool that enhances user experience on your own website and captures engagement during active browsing sessions. This can be either a Chrome plugin, well-built cookie, or simply a functional fragment of your website, like the search engine.

► Mobile Applications

Those are native apps that can reach users directly through push notifications and create habitual usage patterns. They can be a “product in your pocket” or something complementary to a wider ecosystem.

First-Time vs. Repeated Communication: Key Differences

CRITERIA	FIRST-TIME COMMUNICATION	REPEATED COMMUNICATION
Objective	Reach and attract new users	Engage and retain existing users
Relationship Type	Delegated / Indirect	Owned / Direct
Typical Channels	Social media, paid advertising (Google, Facebook), SEO, influencer reach	Email marketing, push notifications, retargeting, mobile applications
Platform Dependency	High — relies on external platforms and algorithms	Low — full control over communication
Cost Over Time	Increasing — higher competition and rising ad costs	Stable or decreasing — after acquisition
User Attention Window	Short-term — scrolling, quick clicks	Long-term — reading, app interaction
Ownership of Contact	None — user data belongs to platforms	Yes — direct access to user inbox or device
Example Tool	Facebook Ads, Google Ads, blog articles	Mobile app pushes, newsletters, retargeting campaigns
Interaction Type	One-way or passive	Two-way or loyalty-driven
Impact Duration	Immediate but short-lived	Sustained behavioral influence

The transition from first-time to repeated communication channels is where many businesses struggle. They often default to email marketing due to familiarity and perceived lower barriers to entry. However, this decision should be based on a deeper understanding of user behavior patterns rather than ease of use. Younger users will be more likely to download an app, while older leads will have a better ROI with retargeting ads. It's all about choosing the right channel. **So, how to do that?**

The Key to Choosing the Right Channel: Habits, Not Resources

Most businesses choose their repeated communication strategy based on two factors: existing know-how and available resources, including budget. This leads to a predictable pattern where email marketing dominates simply because it seems more accessible. This approach is fundamentally flawed, especially given the low conversion rates of emails.

The key to selecting the right communication channel isn't your current capabilities or budget constraints. The determining factor should be the specific behaviour you want to leverage or induce in your user base.

Let's use Uber as an example: the company likely wanted to "train" their users to use them as a first move when they needed a ride.



Identifying the Right Habit-Channel Match

For Rare or Non-Existent Habits: Email Marketing and Retargeting Ads

When your product or service doesn't align with a regular user behavior pattern or it's hard to determine one, email marketing becomes your best option. This vanilla marketing method benefits from using a widely used channel that is easy to react to on the spot and later on. On top of that, users expect to get the type of messaging you will need to send them.

Email works because it doesn't require users to remember to check a specific app or website. Instead, it arrives in a channel they already check regularly, making it ideal for infrequent purchase decisions or services used sporadically.

On the other hand, it's really hard to find the balance between sending enough emails to achieve your business goals, but not too many as not to provoke users' ignorance or anger. Email marketing is at its core a passive conversion strategy – you connect with the audience regularly hoping to stay with them long enough for them to be ready to buy and being engaging and relevant enough for them to stay subscribed.

Retargeting ads serve a similar function and are way more successful. Way more expensive as well.

For Occasional but Predictable Habits: Web Plugins

When users have a specific need that arises occasionally, and you want to be available at that exact moment, web plugins often provide the perfect solution.

Consider a hotel price comparison tool. Users won't be comparing hotels regularly, but when they want to do it, there needs to be a tool that will serve them the exact information they need at that time.

Web plugins excel in these scenarios because they activate precisely when users are already in the relevant context, eliminating the friction of remembering to open a separate application. On the other hand, they are also inherently passive and only serve users with an intention. They won't be able to turn a non-interested lead into one that might convert.

For Regular Habits: Mobile Applications

When your product or service aligns with behaviors that occur at least once every two weeks, mobile applications offer the highest engagement potential. This frequency threshold is crucial because it allows for the development of genuine usage habits while providing enough touchpoints for meaningful optimization.

Mobile apps excel in this space because they can leverage the most personal device users carry, their smartphone, and can initiate engagement through push notifications even when users aren't actively thinking about your service. Plus, once installed, the comms with the user become free, unlike many others. Of course, there is a noticeable difficulty in getting started compared to other methods, but the return on investment is potentially infinite. It's also worth stressing that not all businesses are compatible with using mobile apps.

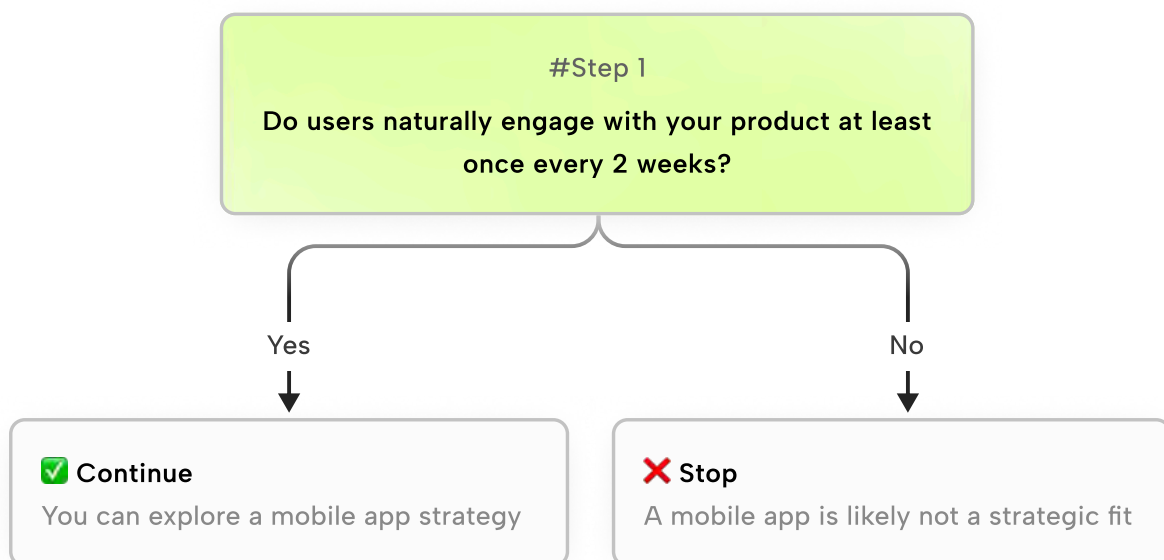
So, how to decide if a mobile app makes sense for you?

When Mobile Apps Make Strategic Sense

The decision to build a mobile app, appealing as it may be, is not an obvious one to make. Apps require significant development resources, ongoing maintenance, and face intense competition for user attention. However, when the conditions are right, mobile apps offer unmatched engagement potential.

01 The Bi-Weekly Rule

The fundamental criterion for mobile app viability is usage frequency. If your product or service naturally fits into a pattern where users would benefit from it at least once every two weeks, you have the foundation for a successful mobile app. So, this will make zero sense for a self-employed handyman, for example.

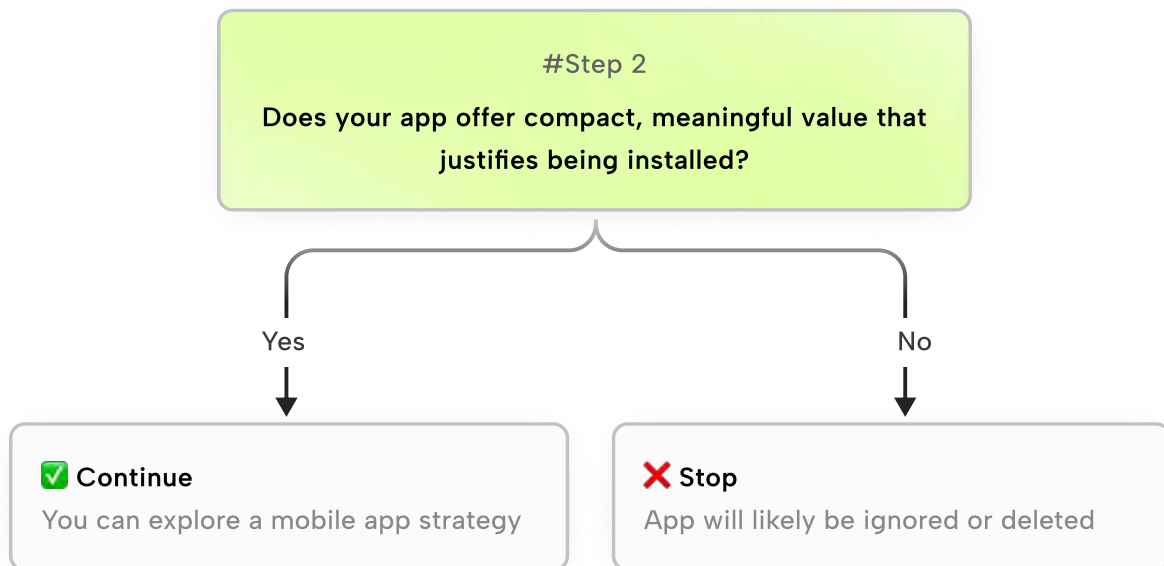


This frequency threshold exists because:

- It allows sufficient opportunities to establish habit loops
- Users won't forget about your app between uses
- You can gather enough data for meaningful optimization
- The app can become part of users' regular digital routines

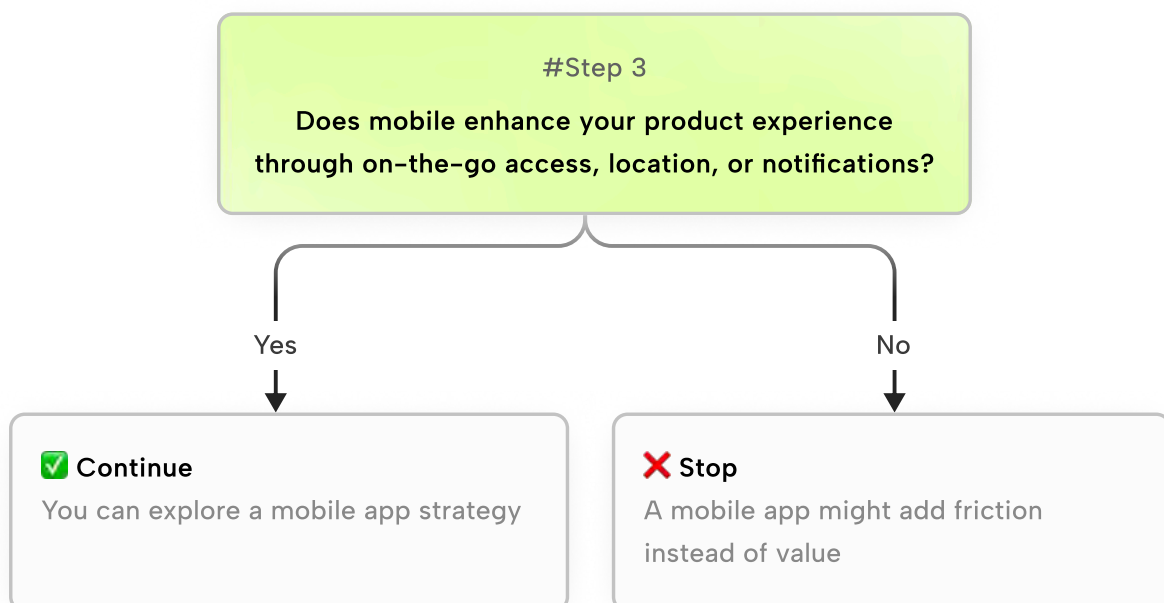
02 Value Density

Your app must provide concentrated value that justifies the screen real estate and mental space it occupies on users' devices. In simpler words, this can't be an app for the app's sake. It needs to provide the user with additional, real value. Say a cinema app that reminds you about your movie and offers you discounts on popcorn if you buy the ticket via the app.



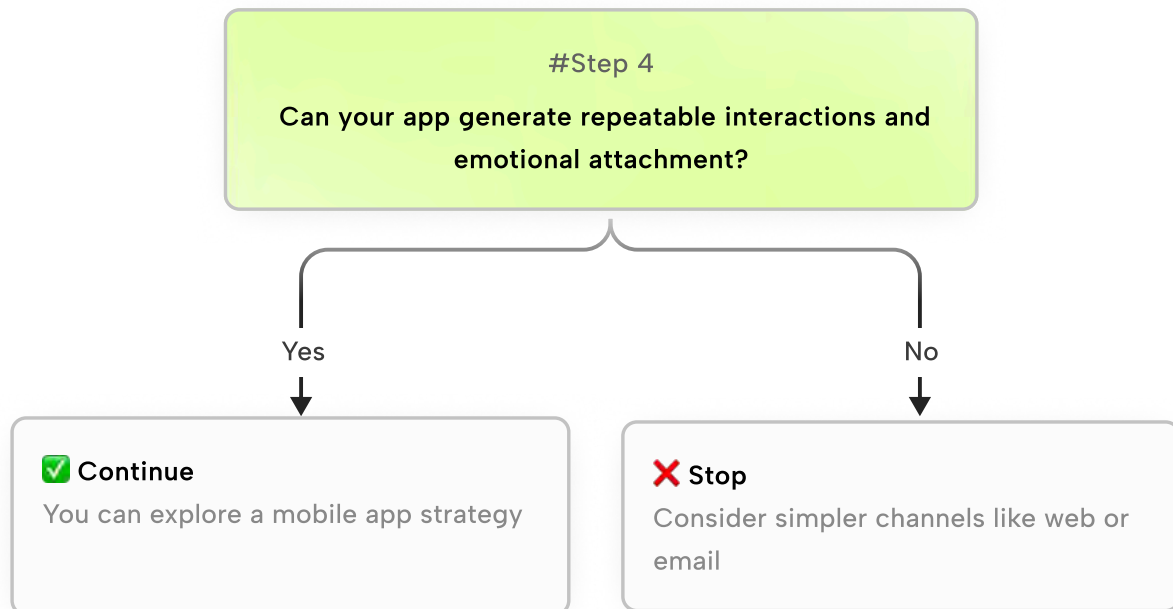
03 Context Relevance

The mobile context should enhance your service's value proposition. Mobile apps excel when they leverage location data, push notifications, or on-the-go accessibility. A map of location for your cinema chain can go a long way to "suggest" to your user to watch a movie while visiting a different city.



04 Engagement Depth

Successful apps create opportunities for users to invest time and attention, building switching costs and emotional attachment. As a cinema chain, you could use your mobile app and loyalty programs and dynamically offer discounts for low-attendance screenings. After all, occupying a seat with a small profit is better than an empty one.



Common Mistakes in App Development Decisions

At the same time, you also need to realise the most common pitfalls when determining whether you need a mobile app or not.

Many businesses pursue mobile apps for the wrong reasons:

- Following competitor strategies without understanding their context
- Believing apps automatically provide a better user experience
- Assuming apps will solve engagement problems that exist at a product level
- Underestimating the ongoing commitment required for app success
- Not including the cost of promoting the app in the initial budget

Right, let's assume by this stage you have determined your business will benefit from a mobile app. But the potential for an app and a successful app are still miles apart. Let's address this now.

Building a Mobile App Channel That Converts

Creating a successful mobile app requires more than just a copy of your website or product compressed into an app format. While mobile-first design helps, you need to figure out how your product interacts with the user almost from the ground up in order to achieve a situation where your product becomes a part of the user's daily routine.

Understanding Mobile User Behavior

Mobile app success hinges on a fundamental truth: users are incredibly quick to abandon apps that don't immediately demonstrate value. The vast majority of users will churn within 72 hours of first contact if they don't experience a clear "aha moment" that demonstrates the app's value.

This creates enormous pressure on the first interactions with your app. These moments must be carefully orchestrated to deliver immediate value while simultaneously beginning the process of habit formation.

The Two-Pillar Strategy

As mentioned, successful mobile apps are built on two interconnected pillars:



Habit Loop Design

Creating a psychological pattern that encourages regular return usage



Push Notification Strategy

Providing the external trigger that initiates the habit loop when users aren't actively engaged

Neither pillar can succeed alone. A brilliant habit loop without effective push notifications (perhaps aided by an email campaign from time to time) will struggle to activate consistently. Perfect push notifications without a compelling habit loop will lead to quick user burnout and app deletion.

As it's very important, let's now look at both pillars in detail.

The Habit Loop: Your App's Foundation

The habit loop, popularized by Charles Duhigg's research, consists of three components that need to be designed well together in order to work.

01 The Trigger

Triggers initiate user behavior and can be either external or internal. In mobile apps, external triggers typically come through push notifications, while internal triggers develop over time as users associate certain feelings or situations with your app.

External Triggers

These must be carefully crafted to feel valuable rather than intrusive. The most effective external triggers provide immediate, actionable information that users want to receive.

External Triggers

These develop as users begin to associate your app with specific emotional states or situations. For example, feeling bored might trigger the desire to open a social media app, or feeling hungry might trigger the launch of a food delivery app.

02 The Routine

The routine is the behavior itself, meaning it's what users actually do when they open your app. This component requires the most careful design because it must be simultaneously simple enough to become automatic and valuable enough to justify the time investment.

Simplicity

The core routine should be achievable with minimal cognitive load. Complex workflows that require decision-making will struggle to become habitual.

Progression

While the basic routine should be kept simple, there should also be branching opportunities for users to engage further and discover new value opportunities.

Consistency

The routine should be predictable, allowing the user to, in time, benefit from it on an "autopilot".

03 The Reward (The Aha Moment)

The reward component is what reinforces the habit loop and encourages repetition. In app design, this is often called the "aha moment". It's the point where users clearly understand and experience the value your app provides.

Immediate Gratification

The reward should be delivered quickly after the routine is completed. Delayed gratification works against habit formation.

Variable Reinforcement

While the core value should be consistent, introducing elements of variability in the rewards can strengthen the habit loop by maintaining user curiosity.

Personal Relevance

The most powerful rewards feel personally meaningful to individual users rather than generic benefits.

The Critical 72-Hour Window

The first 3 days after app installation represent the most crucial period for habit loop establishment. During this time, users are most open to changing their behavior patterns and incorporating new routines.

Your app's onboarding process must therefore be designed to deliver the complete habit loop experience within this timeframe. Users should encounter the trigger, complete the routine, and receive the reward multiple times before the 72-hour window closes. This should also be the same as the so-called "magic journey" of your product, where the happy path to value is so good and so rewarding that it instantly converts to a committed, engaged user..

This often means prioritizing immediate value delivery over comprehensive feature introduction. It's better to have users experience one powerful habit loop than to overwhelm them with features they won't have time to appreciate. It's pretty similar to old-time real strategy game single player campaigns; You are not given all the buildings and units that can be built in the game, but instead you are given access as you progress through the game and learn the ropes.

Now, of course, your mobile app will never be truly addictive, so you need it to work hard not to be forgotten and deliver value to the user on an ongoing basis. For that, you can utilize the tried and tested push notifications.

Push Notifications: The Engine of Engagement

This direct line to your customers with almost direct access has an enormous potential to elevate your engagement levels exponentially. There are, however, some hoops to jump through, and being wise and strategic about your pushes is the only way to deliver on the promise from the previous sentence. We'll explain how to avoid typical pitfalls, but first things first, let's ensure your user will see the push notifications in the first place.

The Permission Challenge

The moment users first see your push notification permission request may be the most important moment in the entire app experience. Users who deny permission at this point require significantly more effort to re-engage, as changing notification settings in phone preferences represents a much higher friction activity.

So, how to maximize the number of permissions for push notifications?

► Time the Request

Never request push notification permission immediately upon app launch. Users need to understand the value your app provides before they agree to be fed, well, let's be honest, most likely marketing from you.

► Provide Context

Taking into account the marketing expectation in the previous point, it's a good idea to let the user know what push notifications you will send and how often. You can then demonstrate your intention, and the users might find it beneficial. However, you have to let them know your "strategy" ahead of time. You can do this in the following way.

► Demonstrate Value

Consider showing examples of the notifications users will receive, helping them visualize the benefit before making the permission decision.

So, in general, you don't want to use only the Android/iOS system prompt, but instead present an internal screen first in order to build expectations and provide the best possible value proposition. In the era of shady apps and growing lack of trust towards tech in general, it's important to "talk" to the user before asking them anything.

Right, so let's assume you did everything right and you got the permission. How to make the most of it?

Notification Design Principles

In short, any permission given can be as easily revoked. Thus, you have to utilize the push notification in a smart way, rather than just spam the user with a generic message way too often.

Push notifications should be designed to trigger the habit loop, not simply to drive short-term engagement metrics. This means each notification should be designed to lead users through the complete cycle: trigger (the notification), routine (opening the app and completing the core action), and reward (experiencing the aha moment).

Notifications that drive app opens without leading to meaningful engagement actually work against habit formation by training users that your notifications don't lead to valuable experiences.

Consider the following principles:

► Relevance Over Frequency

Prioritize sending fewer, highly relevant notifications rather than enforcing a spam-like schedule with mediocre content. Users quickly learn to ignore notifications that don't consistently provide value. Moreover, have the user ignore a few of those, and the phone's operating system will stop sending them altogether, and there is no way to monitor this second, silent, permission level in your analytics suite. Pushes will be recorded as sent, but the operating system will prevent them from ever being shown.

► Personalization

Generic notifications feel like spam. Effective notifications feel like they were created specifically for the individual recipient. Consider using the user's name and focus on the value that the specific user can get, not what you want them to do.

► Actionability

The best notifications provide clear, simple actions that users can take immediately. Wordy or complex call-to-actions reduce the likelihood of any engagement.

► Progressive Engagement

Start with a lower frequency and increase based on user response. It's easier to increase notification frequency for engaged users than to win back users who have blocked you.

► **Unsubscribe Options**

Providing granular control over notification types can prevent complete blocking. Users might disable promotional notifications while keeping functional notifications active. Smaller engagement is better than none.

► **Response Monitoring**

Track not just open rates but also the actions users take after opening notifications. High open rates with low engagement suggest your notifications are training users to ignore your app. It can also suggest that the operating system is blocking them, as explained above.

► **Perfect timing**

Understanding when individual users are most likely to engage with notifications can noticeably improve response rates. This will mean you have to keep the pushes tied to the phone's clock and perhaps develop a muting or rescheduling system when the user fails to act on your content. After all, there is no point sending a push when the user is focused on work or sleeping, right?

With those design choices in place, you still need to have your finger on the pulse and monitor whether your engagement strategy is performing on the expected level. How to do that?



Measuring Success and Optimization

Mobile app is a product equally complex and important as your core service, and thus it deserves the same level of careful metrics monitoring. The goal isn't just to drive downloads or sessions, but to create sustained behavioral change that generates long-term value for both users and your business.

So, what to monitor in order to achieve this?

Key Metrics for Mobile App Success

METRIC	WHAT IT SHOWS	INSIGHT/ACTION
Open-to-Conversion Ratio	Do push notifications actually lead to value-generating actions?	High opens + low conversions = misaligned message/intent
Habit Formation Indicators	Are users returning without being nudged?	Organic opens ↑ = stronger behavioral adoption
Retention Cohorts	Are users returning without being nudged?	Analyze drop-off points, optimize first 72h
Notification Response	Are users returning without being nudged?	If opens ↓ → push fatigue or irrelevance → adjust timing/content

► Open Rate to Conversion Ratio

This measures whether users who respond to your push notifications actually complete meaningful actions within your app. High open rates with low conversion suggest notification-habit loop misalignment. Consider scraping that particular push or redirecting it to a more meaningful action.

► Habit Formation Indicators

With this metric, you will be able to track how quickly users move from requiring external triggers (push notifications) to self-initiating app usage. Strong habit formation should lead to increased organic app opens over time. This can be represented by session time and/or sessions per user.

The Optimization Challenge

Mobile apps face a rather unique optimization challenge: the most frequent update cycle is only every once every two weeks, given how long it takes Apple and Google to approve any update you provide to your mobile app. This means you have a maximum of 24 updates per year, making it critical to develop high-quality app iterations every time.

Those will be achieved using the following methods:

METHOD	WHAT IT IS	INSIGHT/ACTION
Hypothesis-based Development	Each update is based on a clear hypothesis and goal.	Track outcome after release to validate the hypothesis.
A/B Testing at Scale	Testing multiple feature versions with different user segments.	Identify best-performing variant before global rollout.
User Feedback Integration	Gathering user opinions (e.g., from reviews) to guide development priorities.	Look for patterns in both complaints and praise to prioritize next steps.
Server-Side Configuration	Controlling app behavior from the backend without new releases.	Push more features behind flags and roll them out remotely.
Analytics-Driven Insights	Using data to understand user behavior and guide improvements.	Leverage heat maps or session recordings for UX refinements.
User Communication	Messaging users about changes or gathering feedback directly (via in-app prompts or email).	Use surveys to validate direction and reinforce choices already made.

► Hypothesis-based Development

With limited releases, each update should be based on clear hypotheses about user behavior and measurable improvement goals. In other words, you know what you want to achieve, you build for it, and monitor whether the effort was successful.

► A/B Testing at Scale

These tests make significant changes with portions of your user base before rolling out to everyone. This approach provides undeniable proof of the impact of the tested features and allows you to test several variants of a solution at the same time in order to determine the optimal one.

► **User Feedback Integration**

Apart from the innovation direction you set, it's your users who know best what they need improved in the product. More importantly, direct user feedback becomes more valuable with those (relatively) long iteration cycles. Implement systems for collecting and analyzing qualitative feedback to guide development priorities. You can, of course, utilize the review section of your app's mobile store presence, though expect only the most angry and disappointed users to express themselves there. Positive signals are also important for knowing what works.

► **Server-Side Configuration**

Many app behaviors can be controlled through server-side settings, allowing for rapid testing without app store approval processes. This way, you can develop more features with an update and then enable them one by one remotely.

► **Analytics-Driven Insights**

We've advised what metrics to follow, but those need to be captured by a comprehensive analytics suite. It will provide detailed insights into user behavior patterns, enabling data-driven decisions for future updates. Similar to those, you can consider third-party software to enable hit maps or session recordings to better understand user behaviour.

► **User Communication**

Of course, you can also use in-app messaging and email to communicate with users about changes and gather feedback on new features or modifications. Surveys sent that way may give you much clarity about the direction you should take and might reinforce the decisions already made.

With this, we have reached the end of this ebook. The only thing to do is to provide you with a brief summary.

Conclusion

When all said and done, it's easiest to say that in order to get clients, you need to invest, or as any savvy businessman would simplify: you have to pay money to get money. For businesses where it makes sense, when done right, a mobile app will have an incredible ROI if done right. That being said, you have to remember that just like adding a product for the sake of it, doing the same for an app makes even less sense.

If you, however, are in a business that could benefit from presence in Play and App Stores, you should simply do it. You could build your own mobile app team, or you could cut some corners and grow pains, and allow AppUnite to help. We'll do all the work for you, and before we start, we'll let you know if it all makes sense and what you can expect at the end of the road. Get in touch today and let us help get you those clients using a mobile app (and more)!

Appunite

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