Downloads are passé.
Instant Apps are the
new fad on the street

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David has been using a parking app whenever he travels and meets customers. Like most other parking app users, David is a bit wary of using it. When he opens the app, he has to routinely make his way through menus and screens full of redundant options and information. Does David really need an app that provides a comparison of daily and monthly parking rates? Or details about on-street parking regulations? Not really. Does he need a parking timer? No, those timer alerts add to his stress and anxiety. Does he need to know how many slots are open at a garage? That is information that only adds to his cognitive overload. What David needs is a simple parking app, one that lets him book an available parking slot and pay for it with a single tap or swipe. David is a prime candidate for an Instant App.

Instant Apps serve a single purpose. The app doesn't need to be feature rich. Users would typically tap a link embedded either on a webpage or provided in a text message to access the app. They could also scan a QR code to access it. The link/QR code would produce what users love about mobile apps—a fast and good looking screen, a couple of simple options that can be accessed with a few taps or perhaps a swipe or two. And that's what an always on-the-go, digital native looks for! A user experience that is simple, smooth and quick.

This is where the future of mobile app development lies. People like David will soon find the answer to their problem of complex mobile apps, super loaded with features they don't ever use.

Users of Amazon's Dash Button will be familiar with the concept of an Instant App. The Dash Button is meant to place a specific order—say a box of detergent, a carton of milk, a bottle of mouthwash or a beer. Dash buttons can be kept next to a washing machine, a refrigerator, in the bath, etc., sort of 'in context' and easily accessible when most needed. They are pre-programmed. Just push the Dash Button (the device has only one button) and the order is placed. Think of it as a lightweight shopping app in a physical plastic body. Instant Apps follow the same simple logic: one app for one task.

Gartner predicts that 20% of brands will abandon their mobile apps by 2019[i]. This is because investments in mobile apps aren't producing the expected returns. The app market is saturated; users are experiencing app fatigue; there are too many apps competing for attention. Many of them deliver sub-standard user experience and, from a business point of view, mobile apps are too expensive to maintain.

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Further, mobile apps used only once after download stand at a massive 24%[ii]. Businesses that are developing or maintaining mobile apps must do a quick rethink: is it worth investing in yet another mobile app? The answer is: Yes, but with a difference. Today, mobile apps are central to efficiency and no business can afford to completely abandon them.

[i]Gartner, Smarter With Gartner, January 1, 2017, "Gartner Predicts 2017: Marketers, Expect the Unexpected", https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/gartner-predicts-2017-marketers-expect-the-unexpected/?cm_mmc=social-_-rm-_-gart-_-swg

[ii]https://www.statista.com/statistics/271628/percentage-of-apps-used-once-in-the-us/

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More apps, but different

The trick is to tread the middle path by developing lightweight, limited functionality, Instant Apps that meet user needs. These apps are quick to develop and require little maintenance. In fact, Instant Apps don't even need to be downloaded and installed. They are accessed online, used and forgotten.

In most cases, a business will simply need to tear apart its existing app and break it down into smaller, lightweight, independent parts. Each part is then given legs that let it run instantly. Instant Apps are built using Android Studio, Gradle, Instant Apps SDK and Instant Apps API—primarily Google Play Services that support location, identity, payments and Google's Firebase analytics. These apps work on older versions of Android down to Jelly Bean.

Apple uses a different approach to lightweight, instantly accessible apps. Apple's iMessage platform for chat and texting produces a mini app experience within iMessage. As an example, if two people are chatting and one wants to play a crossword, the crossword app can be instantly accessed within iMessage. Just open, play, shut, forget.

What Instant Apps can do

The use cases for Instant Apps are numerous. They can be used to improve the mobile payment experience, low budget travelers can use them to book hostel rooms, shoppers can use them to check new fashion wear or to catch up with scores for a football game. In fact, one football site using an Instant App was reported as seeing a 55% improvement in user engagement. A video service reported that its session durations had gone up 130% after they began using Instant Apps[iii].

Instant Apps are addressing emerging user challenges. Today's users don't want to overload their mobile devices with apps. They don't want apps that have rarely-used functionality. Instant Apps will also find their way into enterprises. Several functions and roles are burdened with slow, elaborate and heavy apps. For example, a sales person may only need to view orders, but is instead saddled with an app that has the entire sales pipeline, incentives, customer contacts, relationships, targets and perhaps even some sales tips and learning material.

[iii]http://www.livemint.com/Technology/2Jcl Ug0TA3bWClWOwfBbP/Access-Googles-Instant-Apps-on-your-Android-phone.html

To make this less unwieldy, the email that triggers opportunity or order notification can have an Instant App link URL or QR code so that when the sales person gets the email on his phone, s/he can simply tap it to open the opportunity and then move on to the next stage or view order details. Similarly, an HR function may only need an employee onboarding app, but is instead saddled with an app that has HR policies, leave application work flows and payroll visibility.

Developers are viewing the Instant App opportunity as a stepping stone to improving usage for their full-blown mobile apps. The theory is that users who like the smaller parts of the app are more likely to opt for the full app.

It is not just about 'try before you buy,' but more about engaging users via new channels.

It is an opportunity for enterprises to rethink and redesign their user journeys that can be done by embedding these Instant Apps at the right touchpoints in the customer acquisition journey. The right connects at the right points will help convert users to committed clients.

However, before Instant Apps become part of the mainstream business, their adoption and easy availability is critical. Else, developers will end up doing some unnecessary heavy lifting. It is difficult to predict if full-scale adoption will actually happen, but with the cognitive overload that mobile app users experience, Instant Apps are sure to gain traction and will be the next big thing in the app arena to watch out for.

About the author

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