

Making and marketing apps that succeed



The Business of iOS App Development

For iPhone, iPad and iPod touch

THIRD EDITION

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For your convenience Apress has placed some of the front matter material after the index. Please use the Bookmarks and Contents at a Glance links to access them.



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Introduction

This book is to help developers with every aspect of the App Store. Oftentimes, we see amazing apps go unnoticed. There are many factors that can cause this, but often it is because we developers have trouble thinking with a business mindset. David and I wrote this book to provide you with every single thing you will need to make your apps succeed in the every crowded app marketplace. You will find code example, graphic templates, and tons of third-party extensions to help you take your apps to the next level.

Seeing the Big Picture in a Crowded App Store Marketplace

Living in Los Angeles, there's no shortage of Hollywood clichés. There was a time when it seemed like everyone I met—no matter their profession—was working on a screenplay.

Now they're all working on their own iOS apps!

And who can blame them? It's a testament to the soaring popularity of the iPhone, iPod touch, and iPad. There's money to be made in the App Store, and everyone wants in on the action.

We've all read about the success story of indie developer Steve Demeter. His Trism game, along with many of the 500 other apps that were included in the initial July 2008 launch of the App Store, experienced an overwhelming explosion in sales. With some price tags as low as 99 cents, iPhone and iPod touch owners were impulsively downloading these inexpensive apps at a feverish pace. In the months that followed, several of the most popular apps were already netting their creators hundreds of thousands of dollars, allowing programmers like Steve Demeter to quit his day job to focus full time on this lucrative opportunity.

The media quickly proclaimed the seemingly overnight sensation of the App Store as a "gold rush" for developers. With the lure of potential riches, inspired entrepreneurs from all over the world have downloaded the iOS SDK, racing to learn Objective-C and Cocoa Touch in the hope of cashing in on this software phenomenon.

Fast-forward two years to July 2010. Apple has since introduced the iOS-powered iPad, selling more than 3 million in only the first 80 days. Combine that with the massive army of iPhone and iPod touch users for a staggering total of more than 120 million iOS devices sold and 7 billion app downloads from the App Store. You would think that with stats like that, it would be easier than ever to make money in the App Store, right? Think again. The competition is fierce, and you're no longer just competing against other indie devs, just about every business now has an app.

Why a Business Book for iOS Developers?

With more than 1,000,000 applications in the App Store and developer interest continuing to grow at a stunning rate, industry analysts predict that number will likely double each year.

Think about that for a moment. When browsing through the App Store, how many new apps do you stumble upon weekly or even monthly? 25? 50? According to Apple, approximately 31,000 new apps and updates are submitted each week to its app review team!

In such a crowded marketplace, it's becoming increasingly difficult for new apps to get noticed. Without the necessary exposure, your app may simply get lost in the endless stream of new software that floods the App Store on a daily basis. Gone are the days when you could quickly cobble together a simple app, throw it into the App Store, and then sit back and wait for the large royalty checks to roll in.

The media hype machine is so good at celebrating the underdog stories of a few indie developers who found instant wealth in the App Store that newcomers often assume that if they build an app, the sales will come. When the anticipated avalanche of profit turns out to be nothing more than a trickle, surprised developers quickly discover that a *Field of Dreams* philosophy is no longer enough in this highly competitive market.

“Ah, but what if I've just created the next killer app?” you ask. “Surely Apple will want to showcase it as a featured app in the App Store.”

Having a great product is certainly the underlying key in this equation, but it won't be enough. It's true that being listed as a “Featured App,” “New and Noteworthy,” or a “Staff Favorite” can instantly propel your sales into the stratosphere, but unfortunately, those high-profile spotlights are not purchasable advertising spaces. Apple chooses only a select few apps every month for those coveted spots. With thousands of new apps vying for attention every week, your chances of getting that life-altering call from Apple are pretty slim. In fact, you may have better odds of winning the lottery—twice.

But don't despair. Your killer app can certainly make a lot of money without being featured by Apple. Like anything else in life, finding success in the current App Store environment will require some hard work and planning, but who says the journey can't be fun along the way? There is just one major thing you will need to know, you need to think of your app like a business, not a cash cow, or some get-rich-quick scheme. Hard work, a quality product, and a near-genius marketing campaign is what it takes to win. This book is written to teach you exactly this.

Tackling the New World of Mobile Marketing

If you have the benefit of working for a large software company with deep pockets, it probably has a dedicated department to handle all of the marketing for the products you create. But if you're an independent developer who is responsible for managing every aspect of your own business, then you're all too familiar with the haunting questions that arise when wondering how to implement effective marketing strategies to increase app sales.

And you aren't alone. Just take a look online at the various iOS-related developer forums and mailing lists, and you'll quickly see countless posts (some with generous amounts of cursing) from frustrated programmers, all asking similar questions:

- How do I promote my app?
- My app just got approved in the App Store. Now what?
- How do I get reviews for my app?
- Yikes! My 99-cent app is selling only a few units a week. What do I do?
- Is there anything I can do to avoid one-star customer reviews?
- How can I get my app featured?
- What's the best marketing campaign for apps?

Although this all may look quite daunting, trust me—it's really not as overwhelming as it might appear. My goal here is to provide answers to those questions and much more. A lot of innovative marketing tactics, tools, and resources are available to iOS developers. Just as you wouldn't want to bring a knife to a gunfight, the key to success is in choosing the right weapon for the task at hand. This book's primary objective is to arm you with the ammunition you need, humbly serving as your definitive reference guide to the business of iPhone, iPod touch, and iPad app development.

Rest Easy—This Is Not Your Typical Business Book

If just the thought of reading yet another stale book on overgeneralized marketing concepts causes your eyes to roll back in your head, then don't worry! This is not your run-of-the-mill business book. You do not need a Harvard MBA to grok this material.

Like all Apress books, this one was written by developers for developers, taking you step by step through marketing solutions that have proven successful for professional iOS app creators. I won't just tell you what you need to do; I'll also show you, firsthand, how to do it.

This is not about expensive advertising campaigns, and when it comes to apps, those high-dollar campaigns rarely work as advertised. This is about cost-effective marketing alternatives that can help you sell more apps! In fact, most of the business strategies described in this book cost little to no money—perfect for all of us indie developers on shoestring budgets. The saying “sometimes the best things in life are free” is my go-to marketing mindset. All you need is some dedicated time, patience, a little creativity, and of course, this book. As with any successful marketing campaign, we will teach you to effectively find your niche.

Planning Your Own Success Story

I know what you're thinking. This all sounds very time-consuming, and free time is something you simply don't have to give. As a full-time developer myself, I understand this all too well. Whether I'm feeling the pressure from self-imposed work deadlines or racing to finish a project for a client, time often feels like the enemy. But I just want to spend any free time I do manage to salvage programming the next killer app. I don't want to be bothered with marketing concerns, at least not until my app is finished. Unfortunately, that would be far too late.

Without a solid game plan in place, you'll find that one solitary publicity push when your app is released may not be enough to generate substantial sales. Once upon a time, sending out a press release, landing a few magazine reviews, and listing your product updates on the popular online software directories worked fine to promote traditional desktop applications. But many of those old shareware techniques don't apply here. In the unique world of the App Store, you would most likely see a momentary sales bump on launch day that quickly plummeted in the week that followed (see Figure 1-1). Then you would end up spending a lot of extra time that you had not originally allocated in desperate scrambling to figure out how to improve sales.

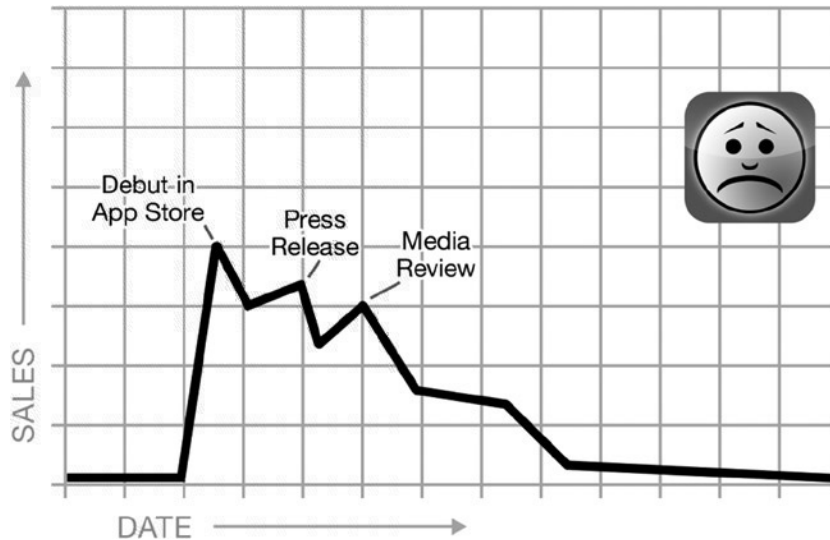


Figure 1-1. Without a long-term marketing plan in place, you risk drastically shortening the life span and profitability of your iOS app

If no one knows about your app, it won't matter how many cool new features you add in the future. Did you build an app that consumers will want, satisfying an existing need in the marketplace? Did you do anything to create prerelease interest in your app? And what about your app's longevity in the App Store? Have you thought about how to sustain and grow your sales beyond the initial release? Wouldn't you prefer your sales to look more like the graph in Figure 1-2?

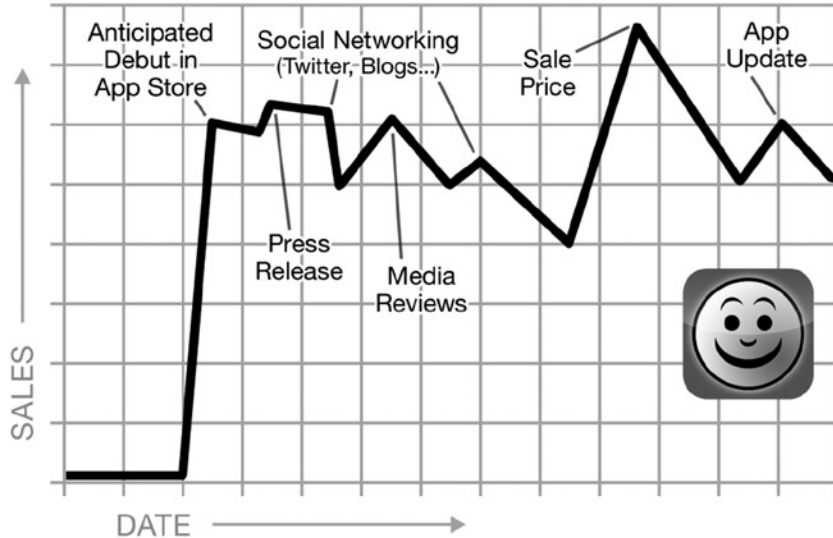


Figure 1-2. Wouldn't you prefer your sales graph to look more like this?

The reality is that if done right, your marketing efforts should actually help save you time in the long run. It's not just about time management. Sure, carving out a few hours every week to focus on promoting your app is important, but that's only part of the solution.

Before reading any further, you need to make sure you realize it is not 2009 anymore. If you want an app to be successful, you need to think of it as a business and be ready to put in the hours and work that it takes.

Think like a marketer. Think big picture.

It's not just about what to do after your app is available in the App Store. Did you know that as a developer, you can integrate several elements directly into your app that can encourage sales, produce additional revenue streams, help users spread the word via built-in social marketing, and improve customer support and reviews? Your app itself is one of your most powerful promotional tools, but to take advantage of these valuable tactics (and many others), you should start planning your marketing strategy before you've even written a single line of code.

In fact, this is such an important point that I feel obligated to say it again: start planning your marketing strategy before writing a single line of code. By incorporating marketing and business savvy into every aspect of the development process, you're giving your app the best possible chance of succeeding in the App Store. Before beginning development, ask yourself these important questions:

- Is my app something that everyone will use, or only people in a specific niche?
- Are there a ton of other apps out there like this, or is this the first of its kind?
- Who are my competitors?
- Is my app a product or a service?

Social networks are your best friend in the app world; make sure to create pages for your app or app company. Focus on building followers and hyping prerelease; this is very important, and if done correctly, can yield thousands of downloads in a very short time. Be sure to interact with your customers and make sure they feel your presence in the social community. No one likes to feel left out, so make sure your users always feel in touch with you and your app.

Now just to be clear, I'm not suggesting that you turn your app's interface into a walking billboard—that's a task better suited for your App Store description, your web site, and publicity materials (which are also covered extensively in this book). What I'm talking about here are essential components that can be integrated into your app's functionality and user interface (UI) design that will help promote your app in very subtle ways that your users will perceive only as convenient, quality-enhancing features.

The iOS SDK provides thousands of time-saving frameworks, many of which can actually make your job easier as a marketer. For example, both In-App Purchase and In-App Email will be explored in this book.

Yes, you read that correctly. Several chapters of this book will be focused on what you love doing most: designing and programming your app! Got your attention now? And you thought marketing wasn't going to be fun!

How to Use This Book

The sequence of chapters takes a very systematic linear approach, working step by step through the planning, development, and release of an iOS app. Along the way, important business solutions will be presented in each phase of the process to help you produce an app that sells! Although you may be tempted to jump around, reading only the chapters that appeal to you, I recommend reading the chapters in order to benefit from this strategic, organized workflow (see Figure 1-3).

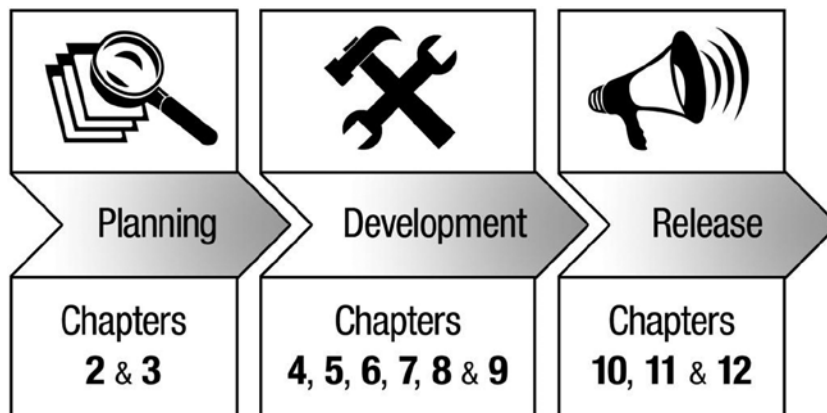


Figure 1-3. For best results, follow the linear workflow of this book

- *Chapter 2, Doing Your Homework: Analyzing iOS App Ideas and Performing Competitive Research:* So you think you've got a great idea for a mobile app? Learn how to identify untapped markets and refine your app concept to be unique and highly marketable, setting it apart from your competition. You'll discover the immense value of doing some good old-fashioned detective work by analyzing what your competitors are doing right and wrong. We'll also explore the advantages of targeting multiple iOS devices beyond just the iPhone and the business challenges of universal applications.
- *Chapter 3, Protecting Your Intellectual Property:* This just might be one of the most important chapters in the book! Although we probably all hate dealing with legal matters, it's crucial to the long-term health and success of your business not only to protect yourself, but also to protect the intellectual property of your original concepts and code. Michael Schneider, an expert lawyer turned app developer, will walk you through everything you need to know to safeguard your software business.
- *Chapter 4, Your iOS App Is Your Most Powerful Marketing Tool:* Your app icon and screenshots are often the first visual elements users see in the App Store when evaluating your app. Bad first impressions can cost you sales and invite negative reviews, so fine-tuning your app's design is a critical component to success. Chapter 4 includes useful tips on prototyping, creating eye-catching app icons, crafting intuitive user interfaces, and designing for multiple iOS device targets.
- *Chapter 5, Social Inception: Promoting Your Apps Within Apps:* Building upon Chapter 4's quest to transform your app into its own marketing powerhouse, this chapter will take you one step further by integrating convenient sharing and social media elements such as In-App Email, Twitter, and Facebook. Gracefully encourage App Store user reviews within your app, build synergy with in-app cross-promotion and third-party social gaming platforms, and learn how to implement these various ingredients for effective results.
- *Chapter 6, Money for Nothing: When It Pays to Be Free:* Unlike the traditional desktop software world, the App Store does not currently allow time-limited or feature-crippled trial versions. To work around this restriction, many developers offer an In-App Purchase-supported "freemium" model or a free "lite" version of their apps, hoping users will buy in-app content or the separate paid edition to gain access to premium features. Learn the benefit of free to promote paid versions, plus the additional revenue opportunities of affiliate programs.
- *Chapter 7, Monetizing Free Apps with iAd and Other In-App Advertising Opportunities:* Free apps can still make money on their own, even without paid content. Learn how to tap into alternative revenue streams with in-app advertising, sponsorships, and product-placement deals. The world of in-app advertising is thoroughly examined, educating you on the mobile ad networks available for iOS apps and the value of tracking usage through in-app analytics. Chapter 7 also includes a step-by-step guide to implementing Apple's iAd framework in your app.

- *Chapter 8, Exploring the Freemium Model with In-App Purchase:* With In-App Purchase, developers can construct new business models within their applications, such as offering subscriptions, selling add-on content and services, and unlocking premium features. Interested in supplying additional value to your users while financially supporting your continued development efforts? This chapter provides in-depth instructions on when and how to use In-App Purchase and its related Store Kit framework in your iOS apps.
- *Chapter 9, Testing and Usability: Putting Your Best Foot Forward:* Did you know that many of the one-star customer reviews in the App Store are caused by user frustration with hard-to-use app interfaces or buggy features? Low customer ratings can really hurt your app's perception and sales, so avoiding those situations when possible should be your top priority. Chapter 9 is all about the value of providing built-in help, provisioning apps for on-device testing, and conducting thorough beta tests.
- *Chapter 10, Get the Party Started! Creating Prerelease Buzz:* Your app is finished, but before you submit it to the App Store, it's time to start generating some prerelease buzz for it. Chapter 10 will show you the best way to stir up some excitement and anticipation for your app by promoting it on your web site, blogs, Twitter, and other social networks, as well as by getting basically anyone you can to review or talk about your app.
- *Chapter 11, Keys to the Kingdom: The App Store Submission Process:* Your product page in the App Store is the world's gateway to your app, so its presentation is essential in properly communicating the value of your app. This chapter will walk you through the app submission process in iTunes Connect, helping you optimize your app's text description, keywords, rating, screenshots, and other required elements, as well as discuss how to set the price to maximize your sales potential.
- *Chapter 12, Increasing Awareness for Your iOS App:* Once you're in the App Store, it's time to rev up the publicity engine to increase consumer awareness of your app's availability. Even if your prerelease marketing efforts resulted in an initial sales surge, there's still vital work to be done. It's your job to ensure that your iOS application does not get buried amidst the thousands of new apps flooding into the App Store. Chapter 12 reveals how to craft effective press releases, utilize promo codes, gain exposure through interviews, and sustain momentum in the App Store with promotions, giveaways, and carefully timed sales events.

This book assumes that you're already familiar with Objective-C, Cocoa Touch, and iOS application programming. If you're looking for in-depth guidance beyond the documentation and tutorials available from the Apple Developer site, I highly recommend the following Apress books:

- *Learn Objective-C on the Mac* by Scott Knaster, Waqar Malik, and Mark Dalrymple (<http://www.apress.com/9781430241881>)
- *Beginning iOS 7 Development: Exploring the iOS SDK* by Jack Nutting, Fredrik Olsson, Dave Mark, and Jeff LaMarche (<http://www.apress.com/9781430260226>)

Getting Started with Your First iOS App

We have a lot of ground to cover here, so before we get too far along, make sure that you've already downloaded and installed the latest Xcode tools and iOS SDK (7.0 or higher). If not, make your way over to the Apple Developer web site at <http://developer.apple.com/>.

If you're not yet a registered Apple Developer, then sign up (it's free) so that you'll have access to the latest SDKs, tools, documentation, tutorials, and sample code at the iOS Dev Center (<http://developer.apple.com/devcenter/ios/>).

While you're there, take the time to apply for the required iOS Developer Program. Do not wait to do this when your app is ready to be submitted to the App Store, since it can take weeks to receive acceptance into the iOS Developer Program, which would delay your progress unnecessarily. After being accepted, pay the applicable fee to complete your registration. After your payment has been processed, when you're logged into the iOS Dev Center, you'll see an iOS Developer Program column on the right side of the browser screen. Click the iTunes Connect button listed there.

On the main page of iTunes Connect, be sure to visit the Contracts, Tax, & Banking Information section to view the contracts you currently have in effect. By default, you should have the Free Applications contract, which allows you to submit free apps to the App Store, already activated. But if you want to submit paid apps to the App Store, you'll need to request a Paid Applications contract. Apple needs your bank and tax information so that it can pay you when you've accrued revenue from app sales. Since Apple transfers money via secure electronic deposits, you'll need to provide your bank's ABA routing number, name, and address, as well as your account number, so make sure your bank supports electronic transactions with third-party vendors. If you plan on selling your app in several regional App Stores, in order to receive international payments, Apple may also require your bank's SWIFT code. Although most large national banks support the SWIFT system, some smaller independent banks and credit unions do not, so make sure your bank can supply a SWIFT code.

Until you complete the required steps (see Figure 1-4), Apple will hold any money it owes you in trust. And since this can also be a fairly lengthy process, I highly recommend completing the Paid Applications contract long before submitting your app to the App Store.

iTunes Connect Manage Your Contracts Dave Wooldridge, Electric Butterfly, Inc. [Sign Out](#)

Your Contracts In Process

View the status of your contracts and manage your contract, bank and tax information. Once setup is complete and the contract effective date has been reached, these contracts will go live and are moved to the "Your Contracts In Effect" section below.

Contract Number	Contract Region	Contract Type	Contact Info	Bank Info	Tax Info	Contracts Download	Contact Info	Bank Info	Tax Info	Setup in Process	Setup Complete
W0170274	All (See Contract)	Paid Applications	Edit	Edit	Edit						

Your Contracts In Effect

Contract Number	Contract Region	Contract Type	Contact Info	Bank Info	Tax Info	Effective Date	Expiration Date	Contract in Effect
W0170274	World	Free Applications	N/A	N/A	N/A	June 09, 2009	March 26, 2010	

[Done](#)

Figure 1-4. In order to get paid for your App Store sales, make sure you complete Apple's required Paid Applications contract in the iTunes Connect online portal

Already in the App Store? It's Never Too Late to Boost Sales

Even if you're a veteran iOS developer with one or more apps currently available in the App Store, you can still do a lot to increase exposure and sales for those apps. You've already invested valuable development time and money to get to this point, so it would be a shame to give up now!

But don't make the mistake of skipping ahead to the postrelease chapters in this book. Many of the solutions presented in earlier chapters can be utilized with great effect, especially when planning new versions and updates for your existing apps.

Take the time to work through all the chapters in the order they're presented. You may be surprised by the tips you pick up along the way that can help even older apps that have been stagnating for months in the App Store.

Developing iOS Apps for Clients

This book can benefit not only the people who want to sell their own apps in the App Store, but also consultants who develop apps for third-party companies. You're being hired for your expertise, so anything you can do to help your clients succeed in the App Store will serve to strengthen your worth to them.

What better way to secure a consulting contract than by offering a full turnkey service, guiding your clients from app concept to launch, providing both code and marketing support? By adding an optional marketing/publicity package to your list of iPhone development services, you're also establishing new income opportunities for yourself!

The success of your clients directly affects the success of your relationship with them. Add this book's business solutions to your existing toolbox so that you can prove to be an indispensable superhero for all your clients' mobile app needs.

Anyone can develop an app; it takes a specific set of skills to make sure an app succeeds. If you can provide more than just source code to a client, you become an invaluable asset.

Ready to Dive In?

Now that we've taken a broad look at the current state of the App Store, it's apparent that several challenges await all iOS developers as they navigate their way along the road to success. As programmers, problem solving is what we all do on a daily basis, so I'm confident you'll enjoy each step in this process. And just think, put together the right puzzle pieces, and you may just find that elusive pot of gold at the end of the road. Mmmm, app sales!

First, shake off all that Objective-C code bouncing around in your brain. You'll want a clear head for the next two chapters. Don't worry—you'll be diving into design and development issues soon enough. But before you do that, you need to do a little competitive research and business planning. So, roll up your sleeves, put on your detective hat, grab your spy glass, and let's get started.

Doing Your Homework: Analyzing iOS App Ideas and Performing Competitive Research

So, you think you have a good idea for an iPhone or iPad app? Make sure it's a *great* idea. No amount of marketing will help sell a bad app. Sure, you may have excellent coding skills with the ability to produce a performance-optimized, high-quality application, but if it's based on a poorly conceived concept, it won't stand a chance in today's crowded App Store.

In this chapter, you'll learn how some good old-fashioned detective work can help test the validity and marketability of your app concept. Analyzing what your competition is doing right—*and more importantly, wrong*—will give you the insight needed to truly refine and improve your ideas into a unique app that stands apart from the rest.

Even if the thought of doing a little competitive research seems elementary to you, keep reading. You may be pleasantly surprised to learn some new tricks here. We'll also explore the advantages of targeting multiple iOS devices beyond just the iPhone and the business challenges of universal applications.

Fulfilling a Need

People buy software to solve a problem or satisfy a need. To-do lists keep us organized. Weather and news apps keep us informed. Games feed into our desire to be entertained. Even silly novelty apps serve our basic need for acceptance by enabling people to bond over a few shared laughs. Although these general examples may be easy to recognize and understand, what about more specific needs?

If you're thinking of building something other than a game, such as a productivity or utility app, here are a few factors to consider:

- Does it focus on a need or issue that is currently not being addressed by existing apps?
- Does your app fulfill that need in a way that makes the mobile experience significantly easier than performing the same tasks on a desktop computer?
- If your app is similar to other existing apps, what feature(s) can you add that would solve the needs not currently addressed by your competitors?

Discovering Untapped Markets

Thousands of iPhone apps have very few users. Back in 2009, before Apple changed their policy on third-party app analytics (more on that in Chapter 7), the popular mobile advertising network AdMob reported that of the iPhone apps that actively displayed embedded AdMob ads, a whopping 54 percent of them had fewer than 1,000 users each. Granted, the few thousand apps included in that 2009 AdMob report represent a small sample compared to the sheer size of the App Store (then and now), but it's still a shocking wake-up call nonetheless, especially when you consider that most of the apps in AdMob's network are free.

Even if an app is free, it does not guarantee that people will use it. And if you expect people to pay for your app, it's that much more important that you provide a desperately desired service, feature, or experience—something users will feel compelled to download.

Although mobile apps are inexpensive compared to traditional desktop software prices, they are no longer considered impulse buys, as they were in the early days of the App Store. In the past year, users have packed their iPhones, iPads, and iPod touches with so many apps that they've gradually become much more selective about which apps they choose to download.

Just think about your own decision-making process when purchasing a new app. You may not think twice about spending \$12 for a movie ticket, but for some curious reason, you more than likely contemplate at great length whether to spend a mere \$2.99 on an iPhone game. I'm guilty of doing the same thing, even though as a programmer, I'm fully aware of how much hard work goes into creating an iOS application.

Part of the problem is that with so many apps priced at only 99 cents in an attempt to boost volume sales and rank higher on the App Store charts, users now have a distorted perception of app worth. Unfortunately, this has conditioned users to expect a lot of value for very little money. To cut through this purchase barrier, your app *must* be special, providing a unique experience and/or satisfying an existing need.

With more than 1,000,000 apps in the App Store, at first glance, it might appear that all the original ideas have already been taken, and for the most part that is true. When Apple says, "There's an app for that," the company is not kidding, or so it would seem. But then, every so often, a pioneer comes along with a new app that causes developers worldwide to slap their own foreheads while shouting, "Why didn't I think of that?"

Sometimes the coolest ideas are the simplest concepts, hiding right under our noses. As developers, we're so captivated by (and envious of) the success stories of our peers that one of the first instincts to strike us is often the most fatal: how to take advantage of current trends by riding the coattails of what's popular. When iFart Mobile became a runaway hit in 2008, a flood of copycat fart apps bombarded the App Store, hoping to cash in on the popular novelty. Jumping on the bandwagon, the first handful of copycat apps probably generated enough sales to justify their development, but at a certain point, the App Store became oversaturated. With more than 500 fart-related apps currently available, the odds of consumers finding and purchasing your new fart app are pretty low. When needing to choose from such a large assortment, it's simply too overwhelming to look at them all, so consumers will more than likely settle for the most popular apps currently residing near the top of the charts. Since the introduction of the redesigned app store in iOS 6, it is now even harder to get noticed. Users must now swipe through tiles of app vs. simply looking at a nicely formatted table; now more than ever your app needs to stand out.

Wouldn't you much rather be the visionary who develops *that* app—the one that hundreds of developers rush to emulate? Of course, we all would. So, how does one go about finding new, untapped ideas?

First, take a look at your own needs and interests. Sure, you're a developer, but first and foremost, you're also a user. Is there some missing functionality that you would love to see added to the iPhone? If so, do any existing apps already provide that functionality? No? Well, if it's a feature you want, then odds are that others out there are wishing for the same thing, and maybe even willing to pay for it—bingo!

It's worth noting that some wish-list items might make great features but not great apps. For example, the heavily requested copy-and-paste feature was finally added to iOS 3, but it doesn't really make sense as its own stand-alone app.

What interests do you have outside of technology? There are successful apps for bird-watchers, comic book collectors, sports fans, and so on. If you're passionate about a specific hobby and have not found any related apps, that might be a great space to fill. Just remember that the more niche it is (underwater basket weaving, anyone?), the smaller your potential customer base will be. If you develop a journal log for the small yet dedicated group of arctic nude swimmers, you could make a few shivering, blue-lipped individuals happy, but you may not make much money doing it. By broadening that idea to encompass all water sports (including custom log templates for surfers, boaters, swimmers, and scuba divers), your journal app dramatically expands its potential customer base, making it a much more viable app concept.

One thing top note about apps for specific niches, users have been proven more likely to pay for something that appeals to a specific hobby that interests them. If your app fills a need or a want of hobbyists, it is not uncommon for them to pay a few bucks and not even think about it. Take a look at the Reference Category in the App Store to see exactly what I am talking about.

If you're feeling particularly void of any original ideas, try turning to your friends and family. See what specific needs and interests they have that might be well suited for a mobile app. But whatever you do, please do not solicit for app ideas on your blog, on your Facebook page, or via Twitter. Although your followers may provide some great suggestions, accepting their feedback leaves you legally vulnerable. If your app becomes successful, you run the risk of a stranger suing you for stealing his idea without providing adequate credit or compensation for it, producing evidence in the form of an archived tweet or blog comment he posted to you. You're better off limiting your inquiries to only your trusted friends and family.

Another great source for original ideas is your local newsstand. Although that may seem a little “old school,” don’t discount the ease of flipping through the pages of the latest magazines. The Internet is a vast treasure chest of data, but you need to know what you’re searching for in order to find anything of relevance. At a newsstand, you can quickly browse through dozens of popular magazine genres. Print is expensive, so if there’s a monthly magazine dedicated to a topic, the odds are good that enough people are interested in it to justify further exploration. The real question then lies in figuring out whether a decent percentage of those readers are tech-savvy and either plan to own or already own an iOS device. If the magazine has a web site, that’s a good place to start. Check to see whether it has an active online forum, an RSS feed, podcasts, or a Twitter account. By just taking a few minutes to read some of the posts there, you can get a good feel for that magazine’s reader base.

Also look to see whether any of the magazine advertisers are promoting computer- or mobile-related solutions. For example, writing magazines include several ads for software tools that assist authors with various elements of the writing business and the story-building process. The App Store already has several mobile writing tools to help authors organize their notes and story ideas, but what about giving freelance writers the ability to track the status of submitted queries to potential publishers?

Now that you have a general idea of what to search for, it’s time to take your investigation to the Internet. Back in 2009 when I wrote the first edition of this book, there were several desktop software programs and subscription-based web sites that offered that query-tracking service, but there weren’t any iPhone apps that handled that particular task. At the time, it looked like the market was wide open for this mobile app concept.

As fate would have it, several months later, Andrew Nicolle released his iPhone and iPad app, Story Tracker, to fill that demand. The vital point here is that if you do stumble upon an untapped market, it’s best to start developing your app quickly. If you discovered a new niche, I can guarantee there are *at least* a dozen other developers thinking about similar app concepts. Time is of the essence. Just remember this famous (and very relevant) saying: “There’s no such thing as an original idea. It’s who does it first that counts.”

When fulfilling an existing demand, you’re selling to a known target audience. But if you introduce an entirely new product concept that is unlike anything else in the App Store, be aware that your marketing efforts will require educating consumers on why they should buy an app they do not yet know they need or want. It is your job to make them want, or better yet, need the app.

You can’t sell people a solution for an issue that they aren’t aware they have. That’s why your marketing focus must illustrate the inadequacies of the current options available (or the lack thereof). Show how your app addresses that void and can save them time, improve their workflow, provide happiness, or whatever it does that would enhance their daily lives (as all software should strive to achieve). For an entirely new app category, you sell the solution by showcasing the problem.

Enhancing the Mobile Experience

When building an app for a mobile device such as the iPhone, iPod touch, or iPad, keep in mind that whatever features your app provides, it should do so in the most streamlined and convenient manner possible. Consumers may be using your app with only one hand (or a single thumb) while on the go. Take advantage of the unique mobile frameworks that Apple provides. Think about how you could simplify your app’s features and usability by directly accessing built-in technologies such as the accelerometer, location awareness, Wi-Fi, and the cellular network, as well as the phone, mail, and calendar support.

A basic example of this is an app that searches for local businesses. Instead of forcing users to always type a ZIP code or an address (which can often be very inconvenient in a mobile environment), enable an option to easily discover their current location using Apple's location-awareness frameworks. Just be sure to have the app first ask their permission. For privacy reasons, some consumers may not want to reveal their current location.

A large-scale example of a product that enhances the mobile experience is Bump, a free iPhone app that makes swapping contact information (as well as pictures, calendar events, and other data) as easy as bumping hands with another Bump user (see Figure 2-1). Exchanging contact information is not a new concept in smartphones. For years, numerous mobile apps have tried to streamline this process in handheld devices, but they typically involve too many button clicks with complicated methods of "beaming" vCard-formatted data. Some of them are even limited to sending vCards via e-mail, which adds more steps. The developers of Bump took advantage of built-in iOS technologies to simplify this need into a single action, which swaps contact information instantly and securely.



Figure 2-1. *Bump enhances the mobile experience by greatly simplifying the exchange of contact information between two people*

“Our primary goal when designing Bump was to create a simple, fun, and intuitive way to connect two phones,” says David Lieb, cofounder and president of Bump Technologies, Inc. “The accelerometer and location services allow us to do that. Bump monitors the output of the accelerometers and sends the output of the accelerometers up to the global Bump servers whenever a physical bump is felt. The servers then match up any pair of phones that felt the same bump at the same time in the same location. This allows connections to be made between any two phones with just a simple bump of the hands.”

Lieb adds, “The idea for Bump came out of a moment of frustration (well, actually, two moments). Back in 2005, I was working as an engineer, and it really bothered me that in order to get some simple data like names and phone numbers from one phone to another one not 12 inches away from it, I had to ask someone to read out their information, and I had to type it in. I wanted to be able to just touch the phones together and transfer the information—but the phones of 2005 didn’t have what it takes to make that work. Fast-forward to 2008, when I went to business school and found myself typing in the phone numbers of dozens of new classmates. Same frustration, but this time, I noticed everyone was carrying smartphones, many of which had accelerometers and location awareness. So we decided to build Bump.”

Even though the app’s idea stemmed from the needs of its own developers, it appears to be fulfilling a common need that many people have. In 2010, Bump surpassed 10 million downloads in the App Store.

The same logic of simplifying mobile tasks also applies for those developers who want to port their own Mac or Windows software apps into companion iOS versions. Don’t just repackage the same features in an iPhone or iPad interface. By designing your app to be easier to use for the often one-handed, fast-paced world of mobile users, not only will you strengthen the loyalty of your existing customers, but your iOS app may also attract new users to your desktop versions.

Some people have even been known to switch from another mobile device (such as BlackBerry or Windows Mobile) to an iPhone just so they can use a specific app that’s not available on any other mobile platform; today that is much less the case, but it still happens.

Competing with Similar Apps

Does the world really need any more to-do lists, shopping lists, tip calculators, music jukebox quizzes, or fart apps? If you think it does, then it must be because you’ve identified some new feature that none of the other apps has tapped into—a feature that people want and need. If not, trying to compete with the hundreds of existing tip calculators, to-do lists, and so on, may be futile, especially if really good ones have already captured that particular niche market, or rank high on the charts.

Perform an App Store search for *tip*, and you’ll discover that there are currently more than 2,200 tip calculator apps in the App Store. True, it’s a great idea for a mobile app, but how do you find an audience for your new app when competing with so many existing tip calculators, especially when some of them are very well done and have been heavily featured in the media? One of the most popular ones, Tipulator, was even showcased in an Apple iPhone ad. The point here is that there is really only so much a tip calculator can do and simply throwing your version into the App Store may not be the best idea.

Sure, it might be a lot easier to quickly churn out a tip calculator app than to develop a complicated 3D game, but looking at such heavy competition in this space, would even such a simple app be worth developing if you couldn’t sell that app? It’s difficult to justify putting any amount of time into a venture—no matter how small—if it turns out to be a bad investment. If you can’t offer a fresh approach or new features that would motivate users to choose your app over the hundreds of other similar apps, you may want to try another app idea.

Ah, but if you do know how to build a better mousetrap, then that knowledge, along with some creative marketing, may be enough to gain a toehold in the market. Just look at how many Twitter client apps there are, yet new ones pop up all the time with bigger and better features or a more intuitive mobile interface, causing users to switch. This is because users are more likely to discover new apps they consider fun or entertaining.

If you think you have a winning concept and do decide to tackle a specific niche that's already saturated with similar apps, just know that you'll have your work cut out for you. It will be an upward battle to grow your customer base when users have so many choices vying for their attention. We'll take a more in-depth look at how to analyze and outmaneuver your competition a little later in this chapter.

If after releasing your app you find that competing in such a crowded space is too difficult and you choose to abandon the app to develop a different product in a less crowded category, you run the risk of tarnishing your reputation and the future of any new apps you release. Why would any users buy any other apps from you if they can't trust that you'll continue to support them with updates and new features?

The App Store is littered with dozens of apps that have been abandoned by their developers from lack of sales. Their product pages are full of angry customer reviews. Although it may sound petty to make a big deal about losing 99 cents, these complaints are not really about the money, but about the principle. You must be passionate about your app, with a commitment to continue maintaining it for the long haul, in order to preserve the relationship with your customers.

When to Avoid Oversaturated Categories

When it comes time to submit your app to the App Store, you'll be asked to select an appropriate category to place it in. Sometimes the most obvious choice is not always the best choice.

When researching similar apps in the App Store, take a good look at which categories they're located in and how well they are faring in those categories. Just this bit of detective work alone can help you choose the best category that will give your app the greatest chance for exposure in the App Store.

A good example of this is DistinctDev's best-selling novelty app, *The Moron Test*. Even though the app includes several levels of game play, the developers made a conscious decision to avoid the massive Games category, opting instead to place it in the smaller Entertainment category. This turned out to be a smart move. *The Moron Test* quickly rose to the top-paid app in Entertainment. That exposure fueled even more sales, which in turn elevated its position to the top of the US App Store's Top 25. Would *The Moron Test* have sold as well if it had been in the Games category? Maybe not. Even though the main Games category is divided into 19 subcategories (such as Action, Arcade, and Board Games), it still would have proven difficult to compete against the immersive, high-action, publisher-backed, 3D games that dominate the overall Top Games chart.

But be careful. Depending on the kind of app you have, sometimes this strategy can work against you. Obviously, having the right keywords in your app name is vital so that you're included in related App Store searches, but people also like to browse their favorite categories to find new apps. With this in mind, don't pick a category just because it's smaller. Choose the category where most people will think to look for your type of app. So, even though DistinctDev bypassed the Games category, the smaller Entertainment category is still a very appropriate and intuitive location for *The Moron Test*; had they decided to put it in Weather, well that just wouldn't make any sense. Apple also has been known to remove apps from the App Store that are not in relevant categories, so be forewarned.

For apps that would fit well in several different categories, the decision may not be so obvious. When this happens, it's best to investigate the categories that similar apps have chosen, especially the apps that are selling well. For example, dozens of note-taking apps are available, but should that kind of app be best placed in Utilities, Productivity, or Business? Do a quick App Store search for *notes* to see where most of those apps reside.

It's highly recommended that you use the desktop iTunes for all your competitive research because it displays much more information than the mobile App Store on iOS devices. For example, if you select an app from the search results, the app's category is not displayed in the mobile App Store listing, but it does appear in the desktop version of iTunes (see Figure 2-2).

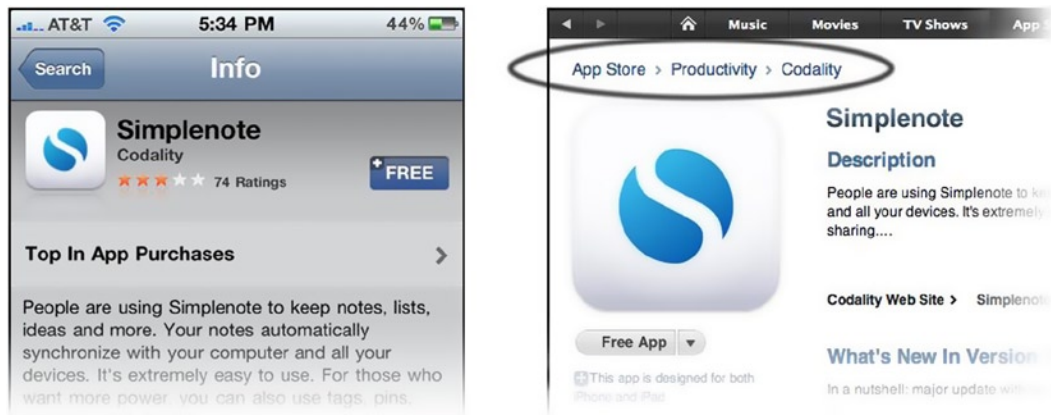


Figure 2-2. If accessed from search results, an app's category is not listed in the iPhone's mobile App Store (left), but it is listed in the desktop version of the App Store in iTunes (right)

When I shop for writing software, my goal is to find writing tools that will help me be more productive as an author, so instinctively, the Productivity category is the first place I look. And apparently, I'm not alone in that thinking. Although some note-taking apps are located in Utilities and Business, the majority resides in Productivity.

Sometimes a particular category can limit your potential audience. In the case of Bump, the contact-swapping app mentioned earlier in this chapter, the developers wanted the app to appeal to more than just business users. Although similar apps are rooted firmly in the Business category, the simplicity of Bump made it an easy data-sharing solution for anyone, so the decision was made to place it in the Social Networking category, although business, entertainment, and productivity, would have been good choices as well.

"At its core, Bump is much more than contact information exchange; it is a technology that lets two devices intuitively interact. We didn't want to pigeonhole Bump as a business app, nor did we want to position it as an iPhone-only utility," says Lieb. "By choosing the Social Networking category, we positioned Bump as a tool for connecting with the people around you. Also, we knew that if we were successful, being in the Social Networking category would put us right next to world-class brands like Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, AIM, Yahoo, and Loopt."

So when in doubt, check out your competition's category choices and the possible advantages they may gain from those locations.

Assessing the Competition

If your app idea faces some existing competition, don't rely on investigating only the competitors you know about. You'll need to do the legwork of finding all your major competitors in the App Store. After doing some initial searches, you may already have a rough idea of how many similar apps exist, but now you'll want to start compiling a list of them for later reference. And every time a new one pops up in the App Store, you should add it to your list.

Staying on top of what your competitors are doing is one of your primary jobs as a developer. The only way to grow your customer base and prevent users from switching to the other side is to make sure you're staying one step ahead of your competitors, and that requires keeping an eye on their updates. Believe me, if your app is a contender, your competitors are watching your every move, too.

You'll want to perform several searches using different keywords and phrase variations in order to find any similar apps that exist. It's worth taking the time to create a list of keywords that you, as a user, might try in order to find these kinds of apps. Also, use a dictionary and thesaurus to discover additional related words. There's no telling what keywords people may search for, so it's best to be thorough.

One tool I like to use to keep a watchful eye on my competition is Searchman SEO. This web site does a lot of the legwork for you, and tracks things such as App Store rankings, rankings for keywords, and new customer reviews. It's a pretty nifty piece of software and can give you a nice edge over the competition. Another tool of choice is appcod.es; this web site allows you to track your ranking position for keywords, and somehow, let's just call it magic, it can actually guess your competitors' keywords. Talk about having a leg up on the competition.

For example, let's say you're looking to build an app that helps people locate where they've parked their car. Since forgetting where the car is parked after a sporting event or a long day of shopping seems to happen to the best of us, it's actually a fitting concept for a mobile app—one that is the basis for at least 2,000 different apps currently available in the App Store.

To find all of these parked-car finder apps, let's run through a few searches in the App Store. The search results for keywords like *car* and *park* include too many unrelated apps, so let's narrow our search to a phrase. The following are the number of relevant apps that were listed in the top 20 search results for the following keyword phrases: *car park* (805), *find car* (437), *car locator* (343), *car finder* (437), and *parked car* (41). Interestingly enough, *car park* delivered the best results (see Figure 2-3), although you might expect *car locator* or *car finder* to be the better keyword combinations. That just goes to show how subjective search terms can be, so try everything!

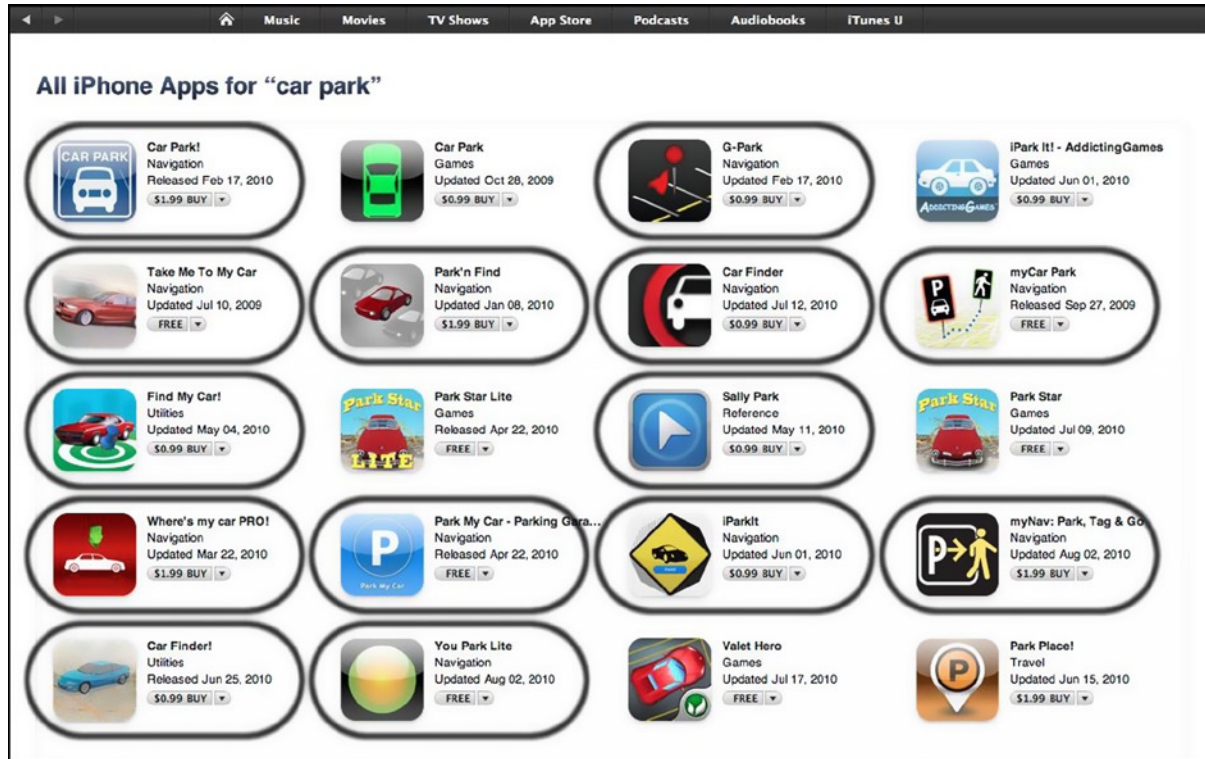


Figure 2-3. Searching the App Store for car park found 14 related apps within the first 20 listed items

This example demonstrates another important point. Did you notice that a select few apps seem to come up in almost all the related searches? It's no coincidence that at the time of this search, apps that ranked higher showed up higher and more frequently.

But for those other frequently listed apps to outperform their competition and consistently show up in most of the relevant searches—and in the first 20 results, no less—proves they're utilizing important keywords and strategic app names to help achieve this.

When most consumers search for a type of app, they usually won't read past the first few screens of results, and that typically means the first three to five tiles. So it's important that you study the descriptions and names of your major competitors' apps to figure out which keywords are crucial for you to include. Although descriptions are no longer searchable in the App Store, they do often include eye-catching text phrases that could prove valuable in your keyword quest. Getting placement in the first screen of related search results will provide much-needed exposure for your app, which ultimately can also help boost sales, furthering app visibility.

Another tip for hunting down your competition is to read the customer reviews for the apps you already found. Often, customers will compare apps in their reviews, recommending one over the other. Make sure to add any new mentions to your growing list of competitive apps and also take a close look at them. Were the reviewers correct in their comparison of the apps and their features? One technique I really like to use is to see what users are saying the app is lacking, or what the app is doing wrong. If you can provide an individual the needs and wants that the current app they are

using is lacking, it would be very easy to make that user switch over to your app. Make sure you never do the sleazy “check my app out” user review in your competitors’ apps; this makes you look really, really bad and Apple will ultimately remove your review.

Using Alternative App Directories for Competitive Research

You’ll perform most of your searches within your regional App Store in iTunes, but don’t forget about competitive apps that may be available only in other countries. This is especially important if you plan on eventually offering your app in several country-specific App Stores outside your own.

Several web-based, third-party app directories are worth exploring. Many of these sites also post app reviews. You’ll find a listing of these useful sites in this book’s appendix.

Analyzing App Ranking Statistics

After getting a handle on how much competition is out there for your particular niche, it’s also important to find out how your competitors are faring in the App Store. Are they ranked high in the App Store charts? Have any of them broken out of their primary categories to rank well in overall downloads? Do those apps perform better in some countries than in others? This information can also help you determine whether a particular niche is popular or profitable enough to warrant your own development investment in it.

Your iTunes Connect account limits you to viewing only your own app statistics, but thankfully, some amazing alternatives can assist in your competitive research quest:

- *Mobclix* (<http://www.mobclix.com/appstore/>): Beyond offering a compelling platform of iPhone services, ranging from embedded mobile advertising to sophisticated app analytics, Mobclix also provides comprehensive app rankings for the US App Store. Want to investigate the charting trends of your competition or even your own apps? You can find a wealth of valuable information here. The Mobclix web site should be a required destination for all iOS developers.
- *MajicRank* (<http://majicjungle.com/majicrank.html>): Majic Jungle Software’s David Frampton has created a handy Mac OS X application that allows you to easily track iOS app-ranking statistics across several regional App Stores. David has put a lot of work into this free software tool, so if you find it useful, consider buying one of his other apps as your way of saying thanks. Be warned, since 2012 Majic Jungle has let it be known that using this app can cause your IP address to be banned from the Apple App Store and iTunes. Use it at your own risk.
- *APPLYzer* (<http://www.applyzer.com/>): APPLYzer is a popular web-based source for free and paid app ranking statistics. This site provides an extensive amount of information for both regional App Stores and overall worldwide stats, so even though its free Standard membership offers a lot, it’s well worth the small fee to upgrade to Pro membership.

- *Top App Charts* (<http://www.topappcharts.com/>): Top App Charts offers a unique spin on app ranking statistics by charting the big movers and shakers on the lists. Similar to APPLYzer, this free site uses visual markers for big debuts, jumps, and drops to reveal the actual movement of apps through the ranks.
- *PositionApp* (<http://positionapp.com/>): Want a mobile solution for checking App Store rankings? PositionApp by ustwo is a powerful iPhone application that enables you to track the historical chart movements of the top 300 apps in all App Store regions.
- *App Store Metrics* (<http://148apps.biz/app-store-metrics/>): This is a great web site, chock-full of iPhone and iPad development news and business insights. But beyond all of its wonderful content, 148Apps.biz may be best known for its comprehensive App Store metrics, which include statistics on active app counts, submissions, approvals, app prices, and distribution of apps across the various categories.
- *App Store Stats* (<http://www.yappler.com/Apple-iPhone-App-Store-Stats/>): Even though Yappler is primarily an online directory for finding and sharing apps, it also provides some interesting App Store statistics that are worth checking out.
- *AppTrends* (<http://appsfire.com/apptrends/>): Instead of tracking the App Store ranking of the top apps, Appsfire's AppTrends represents a ranking of which apps are most popular on Twitter and Facebook. This is a valuable site to monitor to see which kinds of apps are being talked about the most via social media word of mouth.
- *Searchman SEO* (<http://www.searchman.com/>): Searchman SEO is a fantastic tool for tracking App Store rankings, keyword rankings, reviews, and tracking your competition. When it comes to an all-in-one, you really can't beat Searchman SEO.

Although several other app analytics services, web sites, software tools, and even a few cool iPhone apps (such as AppFigures and AppViz) track App Store ranking, they're more focused on analyzing your own app's statistics and collecting data from your iTunes Connect account's sales logs. So, even though these resources may fall beyond the scope of competitive research, don't worry—they are profiled in later chapters.

Finding Inspiration in Your Competitors' Customer Reviews

Let's continue with the competitive research example of parked-car finder apps. Now that you've compiled a list of all similar apps, it's time to take a closer look at their individual feature sets and their customer reviews. All of these apps use the iPhone's built-in GPS location awareness to first store your parked-car location and then again to determine your current location to help you map a route back to your parked car, displaying an embedded map framework, such as MapKit. Some of the apps don't offer much more than that basic functionality. Others offer some additional features, such as saving a text note, voice memo, and/or photo of your parked location for logging the actual row, level, spot number, and so on (perfect for multilevel parking garages). A select few also include the ability to log your arrival time, and if you parked at a meter, they can track the amount of time remaining on your meter so you can return to your car before the meter expires.

The interesting thing about comparing these apps is that they all deliver similar features in vastly different interfaces. And based on the posted customer reviews, you can quickly determine which interfaces have proven to be easy to use and which are less intuitive, causing user frustration.

Now, I'm not going to direct any criticism toward any specific apps here. Nor am I going to reveal which apps received negative customer reviews. The goal of this book is to help developers make more money with their apps, so I don't want to unintentionally make it any harder for them by pointing out their weaknesses. You can easily see for yourself which apps are receiving poor ratings in the App Store. So, for the purpose of this example, I'll give you a general look at customer reviews as a gauge of what some of these apps are doing right and wrong, without naming any names. Let's dive in.

Learning from the Mistakes of Others

For those apps that log the remaining time left on your parking meter, some customers posted negative reviews, wondering why a particular app does not notify them with an alert, reminding them when their meter is about to expire. For example, one reviewer gave a low two-star rating, citing "needs a timer for meters that can alert you when the app is closed." As developers, we see this type of comment as a feature request, but disappointed consumers tend to view them as missing features. Unfortunately, their "feature requests" are posted as negative ratings, which hurt the overall perception of the app and can impact sales. The goal is to learn from the mistakes of your competitors in the hopes of avoiding (as much as humanly possible) those kinds of reviews. When you are looking at competitors' user reviews, focus on what people are saying is wrong with the app. A dissatisfied user is someone you can sway if your app fulfills their missing needs.

Most, if not all, of these apps also fall prey to a ton of negative reviews that complain about slow GPS performance and inaccurate GPS results. More often than not, these problems aren't caused by faulty programming, but are due to the user's current signal strength and the GPS shortcomings of older iPhone models. Most people (especially nontech users) don't understand the limitations of their mobile devices, so they simply blame the app for these issues.

To work around those GPS-related complaints, most of the developers have stated in very clear language in their App Store descriptions that for best results, they highly recommend using an iPhone 3G, 3GS, or iPhone 4, which offers much improved GPS location accuracy. But it would appear that many users are not taking the time to read the disclaimers in the App Store descriptions, and then they get upset when the app does not perform well on their iPod touch devices (which lack true GPS).

These developers also warn that if you're located deep within an underground multifloor parking structure, the thick concrete obstructions above you may prevent the app from pinpointing your exact location. The GPS built into a user's car loses its signal underground, but somehow the iPhone app's GPS is expected to still work flawlessly? It's not always about logic, but you do need to anticipate user expectations.

The apps that have fewer GPS-related complaints have successfully attacked the problem from within. Instead of relying solely on their App Store descriptions, these select few developers have taken a proactive approach by also integrating status indicators into their apps' interfaces. These UI indicators range from showing users the progress of retrieving the GPS location data (for impatiently dealing with slow signals) to location accuracy ratings (for notifying users if the retrieved GPS data is weak). A couple of these apps have even taken it one step further by enabling the user to manually adjust the location position on the map screen when the retrieved GPS results prove inaccurate. This also helps prevent frustration from iPod touch and first-gen iPhone users (the ones who missed the developer's text disclaimer).

From just our little example of parked-car finder apps, you can see that customer reviews can teach you a lot about what users expect in this kind of app. By monitoring their likes and dislikes with similar apps, you can better plan the features you need to build in to your own app to be competitive in this space. Anything less, and you'll be receiving the same feedback from your customers.

Going Beyond the App Store's Customer Reviews

Although the App Store's customer reviews are helpful in the course of doing competitive research, keep in mind that for a long time, Apple's implementation of ratings was somewhat flawed. Prior to iOS 4, when deleting an app from your iOS device, Apple asked whether you would like to rate the app first. Obviously, if you're deleting an app, either you didn't like it or you no longer have any use for it, so this automatically invited negative ratings. If you want to leave a positive rating for an app you love (and plan on using indefinitely), you need to go out of your way to find the app in the App Store to post your review. So, with this in mind, don't assume that the App Store's customer reviews are always a fair representation of an app's quality and value. (Thankfully, Apple removed that "rate upon deletion" prompt in iOS 4, so it will no longer be a concern moving forward.)

You should also take a look at the many web sites and blogs that offer extensive app reviews. Many of them also post video walk-throughs of the apps with audio commentary. Along with the app directories listing, you can find an extensive list of app review sites in this book's appendix. Introduced in iOS 7 is a new importance on reviews. Until now, it was unclear if positive or negative reviews played any role in the App Store search algorithm. Starting in iOS 7, positive reviews help your search visibility, whereas negative ones will decrease your visibility. Keep this in mind; Apple is making a huge move here to encourage apps to be of the highest quality.

Taking Your Competition for a Test-Drive

So, you've spent hours reading the reviews, but have you tried the apps yourself? Don't just take their word for it. Nothing beats firsthand knowledge. Download your competitors' apps, and kick the tires a little.

I know you're probably hesitant to put money in the pockets of your competitors, but with app prices hovering between 99 cents to a few dollars, you don't need to worry about them getting rich off your small purchase. Besides, it's in your best interest to play with the interfaces and functionality to see how well the apps accomplish their task. It's a good way to learn which UI pieces work and which elements feel awkward or nonintuitive—something you may not be able to properly evaluate by just viewing screenshots.

Even if lite/free versions of the apps are available, it's important to also download the paid versions in order to try the premium features that aren't available in the free editions.

The good news is that with app prices being as low as they are, even developers on a tight, shoestring budget can typically afford this, since purchasing a dozen iPhone or iPad apps probably won't cost you more than a night out at the movie theater. If you are unable, or wish to not buy your competitors apps, then there is still an option: YouTube. Over the last few years, many people have begun posting hands-on reviews of apps on YouTube. While this is not going to be as effective as test-driving the app yourself, it can help you gather much more information.

Defining Your Differentiator

Mimicking the same features as similar apps won't propel your sales ahead of the pack. You need to offer something more—something better than the existing solutions; don't imitate, innovate.

What can your app do that makes it better than the rest of your competition? If you're building a parked-car finder app, what makes your app different from the others? You need to define one or more unique differentiators that make your app stand a cut above similar apps.

Upon reading customer reviews, you've discovered that some of the apps that track the remaining time left on a parking meter do not (yet) support the ability to notify the user with a reminder alert before their meter expires. If none of the other apps offer this functionality, then parking meter time notifications would be a nice differentiator to add to your own app, especially since many customers have already requested this feature.

Say you're meeting your friends at the mall and you want to let them know your exact location without needing to call or text them all individually. If your competitors are not addressing this potential convenience, then enabling your app to broadcast your current map location to your friends via Twitter, Foursquare, Facebook, or Short Message Service (SMS) with a single button click could prove to be a great differentiator.

Basically, your differentiators should be exciting enough that when promoting your app, these unique features make the purchase decision very easy for people who are evaluating your app along with several other similar apps. If users want that differentiating feature and no one else has it, then buying your app becomes a no-brainer.

But you can't stop there. Sooner or later (usually sooner than you would like), your competition will add those same features to their apps. And they will probably "one-up" you with a few new features of their own, forcing you to come up with some new differentiators in subsequent updates to ensure that people remain interested in your app.

Having multiple differentiators defined, along with a loose road map of new features you plan on adding to future versions, will help keep your app relevant and competitive. For example, earlier versions of iOS did not support a landscape keyboard in Mail, Notes, and Messages. To satisfy the demand for easier two-thumb typing, a slew of wide keyboard apps flooded the App Store, offering the ability to type e-mail messages and notes in landscape mode. Many of those iPhone apps were one-trick ponies, with the landscape keyboard being their only key selling point. When iOS 3 added landscape keyboard support to Mail, Notes, and other built-in Apple apps, it instantly invalidated the usefulness of many of those one-function apps. The ones that survived were the apps that still had something unique to offer, such as synchronizing notes with Google Docs, organizing notes into groups, posting notes to Twitter, and so on.

Just keep in mind that the more features you add, the more streamlined and intuitive your interface design needs to be, especially on a small mobile screen. After several updates, if your app begins to feel bloated and cluttered, then it is failing its primary objective, which is to provide an easy-to-use mobile experience. Take a look at the official Twitter app (formerly known as Tweetie). The developer, Loren Brichter, continues to add dozens of new features with every release, while spending a great deal of time simplifying the UI design so that additional features never interfere with enjoying the app's core Twitter functionality. Each new feature he implements serves to further empower the user without diminishing the app's usability. Many developers find themselves leaving their apps stagnant after building, what they think, is the perfect app. Users are never fully satisfied, and the iOS SDK is always changing. Make sure you do everything you can to evolve with the app store.