Are businesses moving towards messengers over apps?

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the world adapted to social distancing measures and lockdowns, we saw a worldwide shift towards digitalisation. Businesses rapidly learned that if they wanted to stay afloat, they would need new digital strategies to connect with consumers.

Companies who have long turned to apps, newsletters and email communications as a means of interacting with their customers are realising that there are far more effective and user-friendly approaches to reaching consumers via existing messaging channels. So is business messaging the way forward? Will reliance on apps become a thing of the past?

The challenge with mobile apps

Nowadays, creating an app for consumers is a tried and tested method. After all, having a tangible platform for customers to interact with the business in a one-stop shop is incredibly useful. But how can you stand out from the crowd and generate app downloads in an era when every business has one?

Designing an easy-to-use app is no simple feat, and all expensive app

development is wasted if nobody downloads it. Put simply, the app market is saturated. Google play, the Android marketplace for apps, has almost _3.57M apps_ currently in its store, while its IOS counterpart, the Apple App Store, has over 2.1M apps currently active in the store.

The amount of effort required to tap into the market, stand out and generate downloads is huge, particularly if – as is usually the case – the customer has a wide range of choice for apps that perform similar services. Take the daily commute as an example – there are multiple journey planning apps, individual apps for each operator or transport provider to keep track of disruption, and an entirely separate tranche of apps for the numerous coffee shops and cafes that passengers pop into each day at the station.

Consider usage after download: many apps are downloaded for a particular purpose and only used once or twice before being ignored or uninstalled, making them a truly ineffective channel for customer engagement. And according to market researchers _Statista_, travel and ecommerce apps were the most likely to be uninstalled within 30 days of download. Consumers are now selective as to what they use or keep.

If we look beyond the question of standing out in a saturated market, apps come with a host of other challenges, including privacy and data tracking concerns. Consumers are growing increasingly savvy about how their data is being used and tracked, and could grow wary of data tracking in new apps that aren't as established. Add to this intrusive adverts, push notifications, complex set up processes and storage and battery drainage, and it is easy to see how app fatigue is a real problem. You start to understand why building a standalone app to engage with your customers may not be the best use of capital and time for your business.

Business messaging channels as the solution

So, what is the alternative to apps? The answer is to adopt a _messenger-based_ approach to reach your audience. WhatsApp and Messenger are just two existing messaging channels that already have a vast active user base.

As of January 2022, WhatsApp has over 2B active monthly users, with Messenger coming in close with almost 1B active monthly users.

These are consumers who have already downloaded the app and are actually using it, mostly multiple times each day and for significant lengths of time. Business messaging has come to the fore in recent weeks. At Meta's inaugural Conversations conference on business messaging, Zuckerberg announced the launch of a Cloud API to further open up WhatsApp for business use, free for smaller companies. In his keynote, he highlighted that more than one billion users globally connect with a business account across Meta's messaging services each week.

Zipabout provides passengers across the UK's public transport network with personalised journey information, all delivered through WhatsApp and Messenger with upwards of 1.2M messages each month. Last year, we were the first globally to launch WhatsApp alongside Messenger as a customer communications channel for rail journey information through National Rail Enquiries' Alert Me service.

Using these channels makes the service accessible to millions without any need for app download, giving passengers relevant travel information when they need it. There is nothing intrusive, no flood of irrelevant notifications and no unethical location tracking through an app. In a fast-paced online world, we no longer want to end up restricted in a closed-loop proprietary app. We want information or services conveniently sent to us at the right time and place, and using messaging channels to do that puts businesses on the front foot.

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