

# GET YOUR



# IN GEAR

**Fine-tune  
your  
mobile  
strategy  
for 2012**

BY TIM SOHN

**M**any newspapers are diving into the app business, releasing versions for iPhone and iPad, Android, Kindle and/or BlackBerry. Some publishers are taking a wait-and-see approach, while others want to get the product out the door as soon as possible. Some have in-house programming teams, while others are opting for third-party vendors. Some are focusing on PDF replicas, while others are zoning in on breaking news updates. And some have a combination of the two. The bottom line is, when weighing whether to launch apps — or which ones to release — each newspaper market is different and needs specific products depending on its audience.



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### Cater to your audience

*Tulsa World*, a family owned newspaper in Tulsa, Okla., unveiled its first app — for iPhone — in 2010. Web editor Jason Collington said the paper now has apps for BlackBerry, iPhone, iPad, Android, and Kindle.

“We have a very tech-savvy audience. When (customers) have a print subscription, they can activate their account for unlimited digital access. So, they are able to not only read the paper during the day, but also go to their iPad or iPhone or Android or Kindle throughout the rest of the day and get updates from there. We’ve had a lot of print subscribers who are interested in our digital products,” Collington said.

In April 2011, the *World* launched a paid metered model on its website and allowed readers to purchase a subscription for all digital products except Kindle. The paper updates its website up to 60 times a day. *Tulsa World* does not follow a digital first model. The paper’s leadership believes print and digital go hand-in-hand, so content is planned throughout the day according to a symbiotic model.

“What we found is, every time we put our content on a new platform, an audience was created. We heard from a lot of our subscribers getting



iPads or getting Androids. They were calling us, wondering when we were going to get on that particular platform,” Collington said. “I kept all the emails and phone calls, and when we did launch on those products, I turned around and let them all know, ‘hey, we are now on there; thank you for the suggestions and the patience as we develop them.’”

In 2011, Hearst Newspapers released iPad apps for its four major metro papers: the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Houston Chronicle*, *San Antonio (Texas) Express-News*, and *Albany (N.Y.) Times Union*. *San Francisco Chronicle* for iPad was the first of the four to launch, and that decision had everything to do with its audience.

“For the iPad specifically, we started with San Francisco, it being the biggest market that we had and also a market where we know the penetration of the iPad is greater than in our other markets, pretty significantly,” said Karen Brophy, head of digital for Hearst Newspapers. “We did

research on how many subscribers were planning to get iPads or already had one. When we got the numbers for last year, it was 12 percent had (an iPad) and about 13 percent more were planning to (purchase an iPad in the future). So we had this number of 25 percent, which was a good target of subscribers or people on our list that we would talk to.”

In the coming year, Hearst plans to revamp all of its websites using responsive Web design, which will optimize the display to accommodate the various screen sizes of mobile devices (without having to develop separate sites geared toward different platforms).

*The Boston Globe*, owned by The New York Times Co., began reevaluating its website audience in 2010, and it found that there were two unique audiences: one that enjoyed traditional reporting and opinion from the *Globe*, and another that wanted to know what there is to do in Boston, along with sports news.

“We broke down the audience into a couple of different segments — those that really stood out to us. The opportunity that we acted on was the idea that we really had two distinct audiences, so we needed products to better fit their needs,” said Jeff Moriarty, vice president of digital products for the *Globe*. “So, the BostonGlobe.com users were not necessarily satisfied with what they were getting. The *Globe* was just a small part of Boston.com, and Boston.com users — a lot of them — didn’t know

the *Globe* owned Boston.com, so it didn’t really matter.”

The paper launched Boston.com in 1996 as a free, ad-supported website. In September 2011, BostonGlobe.com was launched as a subscription site. It was created using responsive design, with Boston’s Filament Group providing front-end development lead, and the rest of the work done by in-house *Boston Globe* staffers.

Regina McCombs, faculty member for multimedia and mobile at The Poynter Institute, said she has discovered that most newspapers are doing general audience research but aren’t doing due diligence when it comes to local audience research and mobile. There are, however, notable exceptions.

For example, McCombs said *The Orange County Register* in California and *The Columbus Dispatch* in Ohio have successfully looked at their analytics and determined the differences in behaviors between smartphone and tablet audiences.



### Content and design choices

Different audiences demand different types of content. Some newspaper apps provide PDF replicas of print newspapers, others provide breaking news updates, and still others use a combination of both.

“What we’re seeing on mobile is, obviously, not many PDF replicas because they’re pretty much illegible on most mobile phones. There are still plenty of mobile apps that are basically RSS feed-driven, very simple mobile apps, especially at the local newspapers. The national newspapers are doing much more elaborate mobile work than that. But local,

we’re still seeing a lot of that,” said McCombs, who conducted a webinar in November on five newspapers and their mobile audiences. The conclusion was that three of the papers used PDF replicas either alone or along with other features.

“For instance, for Columbus (the *Dispatch*), they found a really good reception for the PDF. They’re moving toward getting something else, but they’re in no hurry because they feel like their audience is happy with that,” she said. “On the other hand, *The Oklahoman* is offering both an iPad app and a PDF replica, and they said nobody is choosing the replica. Almost everyone is choosing the actual app. So, I think there may be some audience variation there, or it may be just how you’re reading your audience.”



The *Tulsa World* Android, iPhone, and Kindle apps provide stories from the newspaper, as well as breaking news, with up to 100 updates daily. Only the iPad app provides PDF replicas of the print paper. All of the apps also allow users to read comments.

“We have a very vibrant comment community. We get about 1,700 comments a day. People not only read the stories, but they want to read the reactions to the stories,” Collington said.

The four Hearst daily newspapers that have iPad apps use the same template but different CSS, fonts, and graphics for each market.

“It looks pretty much the same; the layout and structure. It allows us to do that once — we don’t have to do it

for four different people. That’s why we’re trying to keep them all on the same path. It just makes life easier,” Brophy said. “But on the content side, (the editors) can customize it for any special section of their newspaper. So, San Antonio might have a rodeo section that you certainly wouldn’t get in San Francisco. The way that it’s built, they can put up a section anytime they want.”

Hearst’s newspapers release both morning and afternoon iPad editions, which feature updated news stories. They also include several app-only features such as traffic, weather, and blogs. Hearst’s iPad app is available in Apple’s Newsstand, which means updates are downloaded automatically in the background as long as the user is near a Wi-Fi connection. The user can then read the content anytime, with or without Wi-Fi. The app also includes photos both from the print edition and photo galleries from SFGate.com, 360-degree panoramic shots, and a seven-day archive.

“On the comments side, we don’t do comments yet. It’s part of our overall road map. It would be different comments than on the website,” Brophy said.

She explained that when the *San Francisco Chronicle* app launched, the biggest complaint she got from users was that there weren’t any comics.

“We were working on comics deals — you know comics are not inexpensive. So, we were working on ‘what does it cost, what would it look like?’ Once we were getting through those deals, we were close. But we didn’t want to wait to launch the app,” Brophy said. “The first update that we put out had comics in it. And then other things that were asked for we also factored in.”

Another big factor in the Hearst apps was sports stats, which are contracted out. “It’s significant to implement,” she said. “A lot of vendors who do stats for sports, don’t do iPad options yet. They are just feeds. For the websites, they have widgets that you can just throw up there, and it takes five minutes. So, it takes a little bit longer for things like that.”

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Jason Collington  
Web editor at *Tulsa World*



## In-house or third-party development?

When it comes to figuring out whether you should sign on with a third-party developer, it's important to consider cost and control.

*Tulsa World* is forward-thinking when it comes to technology and because of that, the paper already had an in-house team of programmers at its disposal when it was ready to begin launching apps.

"Because we made some investments in different areas earlier than other people, we were able to take on the whole app idea because we had an in-house crew of programmers. We did not go third-party. We did develop the iPhone app and every app since then in-house," Collington said. "We invested in our programming department back in 2006-2007, and decided to say, 'let's not have relationships with third parties; let's build these in-house and have more control over them and have more ability to customize them the way we want.' Any time you ask a third party to customize something, there's a lot of cost involved. After a couple of those relationships, the president and publisher decided to say, 'hey, why don't we bring these guys in-house and do this ourselves?' I think it's one of the best decisions we ever made in the company, because we are able to control it; we are able to test it better. We think that we're able to produce a better app and better content because of it."

In terms of staffing, *Tulsa World* has one app developer (whom colleagues have dubbed iGeorge), four designers, eight other programmers, and Collington, the Web editor.

According to Brophy, Hearst Newspapers has 15 to 20 people who work on app development. However,

that's not the only thing they work on all day long. They also have website responsibilities.

McCombs said that newspapers have much more control if their own staff members develop apps.

"You have total control if it's in-house. So, if you have small changes you need to make, if there are tweaks, simple things, it's much easier to do those kinds of things. On the other hand, you've got to have those skills in-house, and getting somebody who may have the ability to do the higher-powered, more in-depth work can be expensive too, and it's tough to find those folks who have a news background," she said, emphasizing that not many local newspapers have staff members who focus exclusively on mobile.

"There are not many places that have invested in, for instance, a mobile staff, where they are actually publishing, say different headlines, or making different choices about content," McCombs said. "I know a few places. I don't know any at the local level, except they might have one person who's doing some headline tweaks or some small tweaks and things."

For papers that don't have the luxury of an in-house app development

team, there's no dearth of third-party contractors to help get your mobile strategy off the ground. Elyse Phillips is marketing director of Appcelerator, a company that offers products and services for developing apps across multiple platforms. She said most publishers start small with basic apps, then add more features and functionality as their strategy progresses.

"We see customers, including newspaper publishers, following a 'mobile maturity model' as they roll out mobile apps," Phillips said. "Typically, companies enter mobile with a 'brochureware' type application, which is fairly static. Then they add more features that allow them to interact with their customers, and ultimately they learn how to transact with customers. This follows the same model that we saw with the Web, but it's moving much faster with mobiles because we all learned a lot from the Web."

Even with a third-party developer, publishers should plan on having support staff in-house to maintain the app and address any problems that arise. Appcelerator touts its Titanium development software as a convenience to publishers, because it utilizes skills that most Web develop-

ers already know — JavaScript, HTML, CSS — so your current Web team can easily keep tabs on your mobile app.

"If the app was developed using Titanium, then a newspaper can maintain the app using their in-house Web team," Phillips said. "Alternatively, if the app is built using the native SDKs (software development kits) provided by Apple and Google, the newspaper will need to hire developers that have Objective C (Apple) or Java (Google) skills, meaning they will need separate teams for mobile development and Web development, rather than being able to use their Web team for both."



## Looking into the app crystal ball

So, what does the future look like for apps and newspapers?

Collington said he expects newspapers to produce more apps focusing on specific niches. "Some people want access to this or that, but they want to go straight to it. It's been shown people aren't doing a lot of search on mobile — they are going directly to an app that does one thing, or two, or three things," he said. "If there's any future, I think that it's going to be people having one-touch access to get directly to a particular niche that they want or a particular product that they want." He cited sports or classifieds as possible examples.

Hearst Newspapers is already exploring niche apps and has one app that solely provides coverage of the San Francisco Giants. In November 2011, *The New York Times* launched an app that only provides fashion content.

Newspapers will also be exploring the best ways to offer advertising for

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- Collin Willardson, director of digital marketing for PixelMags

apps. *Tulsa World* has not yet included ads in its apps, but they are on the horizon. "With this upcoming update on the iPhone and iPad we are going to be introducing ads. We have done a lot of trying to figure out the best way to do it," Collington said. "We feel like we have a way that should be the best way to not only sell ads but also display them on the device. This next update is going to include ads, in that you will be able to have a small teaser ad that expands to the full screen on both the iPad and iPhone."

Hearst has included ads in its iPad apps from the beginning.

"We have a sponsorship/share of voice model. So, we have four advertisers, three national and one local, and they had a special in the beginning that the advertisers got 90 days of share of voice, a quarter of the share of voice. As we rolled out other markets, a few of the nationals seen in other markets have become part of the launch. And then other markets have also brought in local advertisers. So, now that we're passed everyone's real launch fee, we still do a share of voice model. But we may evolve more into impression-based. It's early yet to say that the audience is big enough in every market to do impression-based," Brophy said.

McCombs said she thinks that mobile is only going to get more popular, and that newspaper publishers need to be ready. "I think that we have to be aware of how much traffic is moving to mobile, and that we have to be prepared to do more and more of our delivery to mobile devices, and to be thinking about what that's going to mean. If, in reality, by 2013 or 2014, we have more mobile traffic than Web traffic, then that's a pretty big switch," she said.

"A lot of organizations probably really aren't thinking about what that's going to mean, if mobile devices are actually more important to their news delivery than the Web."

McCombs added that the newspaper industry in general has taken a wait-and-see approach. "We (newspaper companies) did that on the Web, right? A lot of local news organizations got there and then sort of waited to see, 'OK, how many people are going to be here? What is everybody going to do? What are they going to want? We'll just wait and watch and see what the other kids are doing before we spend a lot of money on this.'"

Collin Willardson, director of digital marketing for PixelMags, a company that creates apps for publications, thinks magazines are leading the way when it comes to apps because, "they're utilizing all the tools available to them to help bring their publications to life." He added that many magazines offer apps with better engagement tools, such as social media-sharing features, YouTube videos, slide shows, and Twitter feeds.

Willardson said he thinks digital and print will go hand-in-hand in the future. "The app is not meant to replace print, but it's supposed to help reach the market that print can't always reach," he said. "The more devices that are sold, the more readers publishers can expect to be in front of. That says to us it's a growing and vibrant marketplace with great opportunities for publishers." □

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