

How to develop a successful mobile app



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National Museums Scotland's Museum Explorer is a mobile app. Available to download on iPhone, iPod Touch or iPad, Museum Explorer challenges you to discover objects and explore National Museum of Scotland in a fun and different way.



“Your mission is to track down nine mystery objects within the museum. But these aren't any objects... We've identified the strongest, fiercest, tallest and even the smelliest things for you to locate. Once you've found an object use its 4-digit code to unlock a special explorer badge. Then why not capture and share the moment using our unique set of photo frames? Collect all nine badges to become the ultimate museum explorer.”

Background

The National Museum of Scotland reopened its doors in July 2011 after a three-year redevelopment programme. Following the reopening we were purposefully looking for different ways in which to engage visitors with both our collections on display and encourage exploration of the building itself. Having first undertaken visitor research to gauge people's appetites and attitudes towards mobile technology within our galleries, we then staged a series of workshops involving staff from across the museum (from Visitor Services to our Learning team to Marketing) and got them to focus their knowledge and expertise on what would make a compelling and rewarding visit to the museum. We [followed a framework](#) devised by Loic Tallon of Pocket Proof and purposefully 'took technology out of the discussion' choosing instead to focus on the sorts of experience we visitors to have within the museum.

Objectives

We came up with a series of objectives / success criteria following the workshops:

- The mobile experience must deliver an alternative and playful way to engage with the collection
- It must provide a type of experience that would motivate visitors to come return to the museum
- Through the experience, the user must 'create' something that they can share with their social network/s
- It is an in-gallery experience (though probably with an out-of-gallery output)

Target audience

Rather than focus on a particular demographic (e.g. 18-25) we looked at behaviours / characteristics:

- People living in and around Edinburgh who have visited the museum before
- People looking for a surprising / fun day out
- People already familiar with mobile technologies / apps
- People that are unlikely to have a strong relationship with NMS (unlikely to be members)

Process

We undertook the workshops at the end of February 2012. The brief was then fully developed, and possible vendors were identified over the next couple of months. A request for proposal was issued in May, and a decision taken in June 2012. The design, development, content gathering and QA of the app took place from July to September, and we submitted to the app store and formally launched it in October 2012.

Outcome

We haven't undertaken a full audience evaluation yet but we've had very positive reviews and lots of good anecdotal feedback.

Downloads currently stand at just over 2,500 and our analysis of the stats show a high proportion of users complete all nine tasks (over 10%) and lots of badges have been collected, photos taken and further information sought – so we're definitely seeing healthy levels of engagement, if not enormous numbers of downloads.

Internally, the process of bringing staff from different areas of the museum, and who don't normally work with one another, together has been very useful in gaining different perspectives and encouraging creativity, and is an approach we'll be replicating with future projects.

Key points for effective practice

- Do people really want to share? Despite one of the main premises of the app being to create something unique and encouraging people to share it, we've seen very little evidence of this 'in the wild', and the stats suggest this is one of the least used functions of the app.
- Strong facilitation is key. To get the most out of workshops/creative sessions you need expertise to help guide the process and importantly, with a strong sense of what is and isn't possible when it comes to the implementation of technology
- Targeted Facebook advertising works. A short burst of targeted advertising using Facebook's mobile app install adverts led to a surge in downloads at the beginning of the year (it doubled the total at the time) far more effective than mobile web display advertising.

- Keep it simple. This is (possibly) the most important area of the framework we followed, both in terms of the overall concept and finished product. Rather than try to cover 8,000 objects on display we focused on 9 to make sure the app isn't overwhelming and can be completed within a relatively short space of time, this is strategically aligned with an emphasis on producing 'snackable' digital content.
- Although we didn't necessarily design it as such, we've seen a lot of uses of the app by children – either with parents or as part of a school group – this would definitely influence our thinking next time round: the person downloading the app isn't necessarily the one using it.

Additional information

<http://www.nms.ac.uk/app>

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