The Real Cost of Developing an App: How to Avoid Unwanted Maintenance Costs

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The growing demand for smart phones, tablets and enhanced mobile connectivity is causing nearly every business to contemplate an app development program to extend its reach to current and potential customers. While executives eagerly shell out thousands of dollars for an app's development and launch, too often they fail to forecast the long-term costs of a mobile application.

What most developers know, and many business executives don't, is that there is much more to an application than launching it and unleashing it to the consumer. You wouldn't purchase a new car without expecting to have to take it in at some point for a regular tune up and oil change, would you? The same should be true for applications. Before developing any application, you must consider not only the initial costs, but also the long-term maintenance costs. You must determine if your desired app is maintainable.

The point is that an app requires endless updates and improvements that executives must be aware of and it is the developer's job to assist the client in planning ahead. Many development partners actually incorporate a maintenance charge into contracts, informing decision makers right away of future costs. Typically, application maintenance ranges from 15 to 20 percent of the original development costs. So if you create an app for $200,000, expect to pay about $40,000 per year to maintain the app.

In general, companies that dive headfirst into the app development process without any preparation risk spending more than necessary. While aiming to debut a flawless, glitzy app is appealing, it is often one of the biggest mistakes company executives and their development teams make. In the end, this only leads to overspending on unnecessary special features. A Standish Group report recently found that 45 percent of typical application features (both web and mobile) are never used and another 19 percent are rarely used. The goal should be to avoid developing those unused features.

The bottom line is, no matter how much you invest in your app, there will always be a flood of positive and negative user feedback once it's released. Since it's the early adopters who will ultimately decide whether your app is a hit or a miss, smart developers will hold off on the bells and whistles and let user feedback dictate the app's features.

Focus on simplicity early on. Start with producing a basic, fundamental app and then adapt it to fit the consumers' wants and needs. Small changes are unavoidable so best practice is to release a subdued version first, followed by upgrades and improvements throughout the following months. Making minor alterations are less

costly and less time consuming than having to start from the ground up. This strategy of end-user development allows you to avoid wasted time, while also eliminating the risk of overspending on both short term and long term costs.

It’s also best to schedule those minor alterations before the app is ever launched. Having a designated schedule for monthly upgrades and improvements allows you to focus your attention on basic problems. Later in the process you can schedule requested enhancements and add-ons.

The video game industry has had a great deal of success with its ‘downloadable content’ model, a similar strategy to end-user development. Planning add-ons in advance allows you to gauge consumer feedback, which you can use to decide what additional features consumers desire most. That feedback will also assist you in deciding what issues need to be prioritized, in the end, avoiding the addition of unwanted features and providing an application that best suits your users’ needs.

Another factor that plays a major role in your maintenance costs is which platform you choose to develop with. When deciding a platform, you have two choices: You can develop a native app for each phone platform (iPhone, Android, Blackberry, etc.) or you can develop a web application. If you elect to build a native app, you will be welcomed with inflated maintenance charges. That’s because with a native app, every update, tweak, or added feature must be done separately to each device’s developing platform. In the end, if you have an iPhone, Android and Blackberry app, you’ll end up doing three times the work. Not only do you have to make the changes to each individual phone’s platform, but you will also have to work with the platform’s respective app store to be granted approval, a step that can greatly affect how quickly you release updates to your users.

Web applications are changing this. By utilizing the feature-rich HTML5, businesses can develop a single app that can be accessed from any device via a web browser. Traditionally, app makers have preferred downloadable apps for their quality over web-based, but the enhanced functionality of HTML5 is reversing that logic, saving everyone time and money. For these reasons, more developers are recommending HTML5 to offer businesses a more efficient and cost-effective solution to developing an app.

Overall, proper maintenance can be the difference between a successful app and a single-release failure. You would not continue to drive your car despite having a flat tire and you should not let your app deflate either. As customers use apps more and more, your app becomes another face of the company, impacting how consumers view your business. Take the time to properly build and maintain your app. Your customers and bottom line will thank you.

Roy Chomko co-founded Adage Technologies in 2001, combining a passion for technology and the desire to build a company focused on driving business value through web technology. As President, Roy's energy and customer centric approach have helped to grow Adage to a well-respected web and software development firm.

Roy has over 20 years of experience in technology sales, consulting, and development. Prior to founding Adage, Roy was a principle of a Cisco VAR and a web development firm in the late 1990s. Roy has also held business development positions with Wolfram Research and GE Capital.

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