How to Get a School Mobile App (and Get People to Use It)

Having an app isn't enough. Our VP of Sales Casey Mikula shows you how to build an experience worth coming back to.

I've got a confession to make—I am a smartphone addict.

The good news (or maybe bad news?) is that everyone else is addicted, too. The 77% of American adults who own smartphones check them about 52 times a day—that's quadruple the time we spend on our desktop computers.

Private sector companies have realized that people engage with brands on phones, not laptops or desktops—so they're developing mobile strategies centered around smartphone apps.

Over my last three years at Apptegy, I've talked to more than 2,800 school leaders across the country. What I've gathered from these conversations is that education is only just starting to follow this trend toward mobile—which could be a massive opportunity for your district. In a competitive K-12 market, families are researching schools on their smartphones, giving districts with strong, successful mobile strategies a valuable chance to stand out.

But a mobile app for your school district isn't a silver bullet. Studies have shown that as many as 90% of downloaded apps are only used once.

If you're not careful, you could spend valuable time, money, and energy on a school mobile app, only for no one to use it. That's why having an app isn't enough—you need a mobile strategy.

What is a mobile strategy?

Having a school mobile strategy means prioritizing your district's mobile presence over your desktop web presence. You're meeting your students, parents, and faculty where they are: their smartphones.

The most important piece of your school district's mobile strategy will be a school mobile app—but just because you have a mobile app doesn't mean you have a mobile strategy. When you're thinking strategically about how people engage with your mobile brand, you'll focus on more than just checking the "school mobile app" box. You'll think about how to maintain control of your brand while giving your parents, students, faculty, and community the best possible user experience.

Why does my district need a mobile strategy?

Even if your school district doesn't already have a mobile app, you're probably active or engaged somewhere on mobile. You might have a responsive website, a Facebook page, or a Twitter profile. (And if you don't, you probably should.)

These are all important parts of building your school district's identity, but here's why you need a more comprehensive strategy—one that includes a school mobile app.

A responsive website isn't enough.

When was the last time you checked Twitter from your mo-

bile web browser? If you're like me, the answer is probably "never." Twitter has a responsive website—it would display well on our phone screens—but we almost never type "twitter.com" into a web browser. We like the app.

Studies show that people spend 87% of their time on smartphones in apps, not in web browsers like Safari or Chrome. This means that while having a responsive website is a great step, it isn't enough to keep people engaged.

In my conversations with school leaders, I hear over and over that parents check school websites every other month or so—usually, when they need the lunch menu. Each of those visits is what marketers call a touchpoint. It's a chance for you to influence the way your audience feels about you: to enhance your brand.

But if someone's only engaging with you six to eight times a year... that's not very many touchpoints. It's not enough just to build a strong association with your school district's brand.

On a school mobile app, you actually have a place to build that brand. Think about how often you check the apps you really love: Twitter, Facebook, news apps, whatever. More than once a month, right?

Someone who's really engaged will look at your school's mobile app ten or more times a month. If you have a mobile app, you actually have an audience engaging with your brand.

Social media is the worst.
It's okay—you don't have to pretend. I've talked to enough school leaders to know you probably have a love-hate relationship with social media... and it might lean a little heavy toward hate.

I get it. In the social media world, it's so hard to keep control of your brand. In fact, private sector marketers say social media gives consumers (parents, students, anyone with an opinion about your district) just as much control over your brand and how it's perceived as you have. And as I'm sure you know, probably from personal experience, people on the internet don't always use their powers for good.

Look at what happened just this year in Portage, Indiana, when one superintendent decided to end her district's relationship with the local police department. The result? Just

what you'd expect: major social media backlash. On the police department's Facebook page, visitors posted vulgar, disparaging comments about the superintendent and her district, to the point that the mayor's office had to intervene. Months later, the Portage Township Schools Facebook page still deals with negative comments about the decision.

Don't get me wrong—social media is a great tool. But if you're looking for a place on mobile where you can completely control people's experience with your brand, I've got news for you: that place is your school's mobile app.

What makes a great school mobile app?

So you get the picture: a mobile strategy means your district needs an app. But not every school mobile app is going to cut it. Just look at the numbers:

About one in four users abandon an app after just one use
62% of users will use an app less than 11 times before deleting
57% of apps are deleted within 30 days
It's not just about having a mobile app; it's about whether or not people are actually having a positive mobile experience with your brand. To create those positive engagements, you need to focus on two major goals: creating a great user experience and building your brand.

User experience
Why do so many apps end up on the chopping block? Again and again, we see this turnover tied to a bad user experience. In one study, 86% of users said they had deleted an app because it didn't work well, and 52% of users said a bad mobile experience made them less likely to engage with a company.

If you want your school's mobile strategy to succeed, your school's mobile app needs a great user experience. Without one, your audience probably won't stick around.

What goes into a great user experience, you ask?

Speed
People are impatient. We used to spend 12 seconds looking at a page, but these days, we're more likely to click away (or exit an app) in just eight. If your audience spends three of those seconds waiting for your school's app to load, you just cut their time of actually looking at your content almost in half.

That is, if they even stick around. According to one survey, 39% of users will stop engaging with your app if it loads too slowly.

Aesthetics

People are going to judge your school mobile app's credibility on how it looks—often in as little as 3.42 seconds. If you want your audience to take you seriously, your school mobile app has to look great, right from the get-go.

So what's the relationship between how an app looks and how much people trust it?

One study followed 15 women while they browsed various medical sites, looking for advice and answers as they faced risky medical decisions. Researchers found that when the women rejected a site, they usually did so because of its design:

- Boring web design, especially use of color
- Small print
- Too much text
- Corporate look and feel

But when the women described the sites they trusted, they didn't actually say much about the design. Instead, they pointed to the sites' informative content, relevant illustrations, and unbiased information.

Here's the thing about design: when something looks bad, we notice. It's a distraction. But when something looks good, we don't think about the design much at all. Good design frees up space in your audience's minds to focus on what's important: your school district's stories.

Ease of use

As humans, we never want to put in more effort than absolutely necessary. Psychologists call this the Principle of Least Effort. We just call it "laziness."

As you think about user experience, you have to keep user laziness in mind. In a recent Google study, the top three positive words used to describe mobile brand experiences were "easy," "helpful," and "convenient." Your parents, students, faculty, and community members want to minimize the amount of effort it takes to complete their tasks. If your school's mobile app is easy, helpful, and convenient, they will love it. If it's not, they won't.

Let's apply this to your district's potential mobile app. You (if you're being lazy) might take the simplest route: putting your schools' information into a third-party app. Hundreds of districts take this approach. It checks the "school mobile app" box on the checklist without costing much time or money.

Here's the problem. Say a dad opens one of these school mobile applications, hoping to find tomorrow's lunch menu. Immediately, he sees a login screen. This isn't a dealbreaker—after all, plenty of the most popular apps (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) require an initial login. But you've already put up a wall between this parent and the information he needs.

As he keeps going, his user experience gets worse. Since these school mobile apps aren't actually built for phones, every page he taps kicks him to the district's web page, forcing him to pinch and zoom forever just to read the information. By the time he finally finds the lunch menu, it's a PDF that won't display properly on his phone. More pinching and zooming, more effort. The process is difficult and inconvenient. It's a bad user experience.

Now, imagine the same dad on a school mobile app custom-built for your district. When he opens it, he can immediately choose his child's school from the menu. Under a dining section, he finds exactly what he's looking for, right there in the app: the lunch menu for the week. No PDFs, no pinching and zooming, no pulling out hair in frustration.

Next time he needs information, he'll remember how painless his last experience in your school mobile app was—and he'll open it again.

Building your brand

Third-party apps don't just drive your users crazy. They also keep you from building your own brand.

Building a strong brand means building a strong, consistent relationship with the community. Every time they interact with the brand, they should be taking away the same set of consistent messages. But can you really build those consistent messages from a third-party app?

Let's go back to our dad from before, but this time, think about how he's interacting with your brand...or not. On his phone's home screen, he taps an icon attached to your third-party provider's name and logo—not your district's. Already, you've

lost the chance to create one of those positive touchpoints we talked about, because he's actually engaging with somebody else's brand. The experience inside the app is the same. It may be your content, but his brain isn't connecting it with your school district's brand. Why build someone else's brand when you can build your own?

Our brains prefer brands we can recognize. When you give that parent a cohesive brand experience, you're improving his recognition of (and preference for) your brand. That's why you need a custom app that gives every parent and student an immersive experience with your logo, school colors, and messaging. This creates positive touchpoints that could lead to higher engagement or even student enrollment.

Choosing the best type of app for your district
For our purposes, there are two main types of mobile apps for school districts, and they're not one-size-fits-all. Here's a quick breakdown of your options:

Hybrid Apps

Hybrid apps are cross-platform apps, meaning they work on iPhones and Androids alike. While not completely native, they use some features of native apps.

Pros
Because hybrid apps only need to be written once, they take less time to develop, and generally cost less than native apps. In general, hybrid apps are easier to update than native apps.

Cons
Hybrid apps require an internet connection, and usually have slower load times than native apps. Because they aren't tailor-made for the devices themselves, they have more limited capabilities than native apps, often leading to a less impressive user experience.

Native Apps

Native apps are pretty much exactly what they sound like—they're built to be native to a particular platform or device. This means the same app must be built out twice: once for iPhone, once for Android.

Pros
Like hybrid apps, native apps can be downloaded from app stores. Because they are custom-built for each device, they usually offer the richest user experience, fully utilizing the capabilities of both iPhones and Androids. They're faster than their equivalents, and don't always require an internet connection.

Cons
Separately optimizing a native app for iPhone and Android means longer development times and higher prices.

Maintaining your mobile strategy

Once you have an app, you have to maintain it. After all, there's no point in getting a mobile app for your school district if people don't use it. Unless you want your school district's mobile app to become a statistic, you need to focus on driving downloads and retaining users.

Get the word out.

The worst thing you can do is spend a bunch of money on an app that no one even downloads. To get the most bang for your buck (or any bang at all), you have to market your school's mobile app.

You always increase your chances of reaching your audience when you use multiple communication channels to spread the news. Send flyers home with students. Make an announcement at parent-teacher conferences. Put it on the front page of your website.

Make sure you're hitting the areas where you have the most engagement already. If you have a lot of Twitter followers, you should be aggressively posting there.

The most important thing is to get the word out. No one can download and use your school's mobile app unless they know it exists.

Push your stories.

If you've ever gotten a like on a Facebook post or a favorite on a Tweet, you've probably gotten a push notification. These message bubbles pop up on your home screen, reminding you to check out what's new. Push notifications from your district's app can nudge your audience to open your app, even if they haven't visited in a while.

It's a pretty effective strategy. In fact, studies show that apps with frequent push notifications retain three to ten times more users than ones without. And if you're worried push notifications will annoy people, don't be. Your users can decide whether or not they want to turn on push notifications for your app—and more than 60% of them will.

In general, your parents and students won't mind hearing about the cool things happening in your school district. Push notifications keep your school mobile app—and your district's stories—front and center.

Keep your content fresh.

There's a reason popular social media apps like Twitter and Instagram heavily favor recent posts in their timeline algorithms. We don't want to know what happened two weeks ago; we want to know what's happening now.

The same is true for your parents, students, and faculty. When they open your school mobile app, whether for the first time or the five-hundredth, they want to see up-to-date, relevant information about your district. If your content is weeks old, they'll assume your app is the wrong place to learn about what's happening in your schools—and they probably won't come back.

Refreshing your content frequently doesn't have to be a heavy lift. It can be as simple as announcing an upcoming parent-teacher conference or posting pictures from a recent fundraiser. But you can't keep new people coming in unless you're keeping your content up-to-date.

How can Apptegy help?

At Apptegy, we understand that to win in school marketing, you need to stand out. That's why we use state-of-the-art design and technology to build beautiful, user-friendly mobile apps for your schools.

We'll build your school a fully native, custom mobile app for iPhone and Android, making all your information easy to access from any screen. In our mobile app, you won't have to worry about pages that take forever to load, or pinching and zooming to view large documents. We want your app to be not just a go-to source for information, but an experience your audience will love.

We also believe your app's design should reflect your school's unique identity—which is why you'll work closely with our design team to make your app feel like home. Since everything lives inside one app, you continually reinforce your school's brand, creating those positive touchpoints with your audience. At the end of the day, it's not about us—it's about you and your schools.