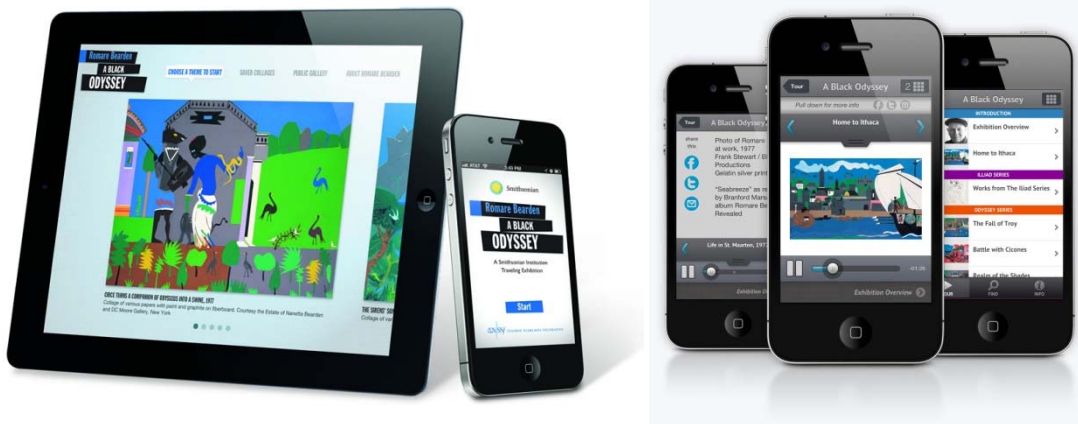




LESSONS LEARNED FOR BUILDING APPS

Here are 10 things to think about when you're building your first app:

1. Do your homework ahead of time. Market research is a beautiful thing, especially when it helps you determine whether there's really a need for your app. Are there similar apps out there? Who's developed them? How can you offer something different or better? Among those which may be similar, what features are missing? What could be done more cleanly, in a more engaging way?



2. What's the point? Ask yourself why you need an app. If the answer is "because everyone else has one, and we need to get in the game," then you should spend some time really making sense of what your goals are. If your focus isn't clearly defined, you may end up trying to do too many things. This walks hand in hand with the concept of determining a target audience. You really don't have to appeal to the entire pantheon of people holding mobile devices. Be specific.

3. Find a central location to store and archive all of your communications. We used the web-based project management platform Basecamp, which worked exceptionally well. You can get a 60-day free trial and after that the prices vary. Other platforms include Trello, Zoho, Freedcamp, 5pmweb, and others. We started off being committed to our project management platform, but toward the end, when deadlines were tight and the stress was on, many of our decisions were made via back-and-forth emails or telephone calls, which are much more difficult to keep tabs on. **LESSON:** Don't leave important project management details in your inbox. Put them somewhere safe, so there is an easily accessible record of your progress and changes.

4. Understand that all devices display content differently. Mobile devices, tablets, operating systems, oh my! Differences in device brand, screen size, and operating system create profound variations in content display. Should you have to sacrifice one display for another, it also helps to know what your web analytics reveal about your mobile traffic. For example, about 79% of our mobile web traffic was originating from Apple devices. Will that translate to your app? It certainly depends on the subject, but we felt fairly safe assuming that the users we had surfing our website and accessing our social media content would be at least representative of those downloading the app.



5. It ain't over 'til it's over. There's no time to sit back and sing "What me worry?" Even after the launch of your app, there's a chance that something needs to be changed. Did you build in enough time to repost your code and have it reviewed again? On average, it takes about 6 days for app stores to review your content. Even if your developer will be handling this step, it may be smart for first timers to get some insight into the **App Store or Google Play review process**.

6. Be in control of your content. This relates back to the first concept but also deals with your own access to information. Does your team have a path into the back end of the app? While it may seem easier to let your developer be the gatekeeper, you never know when something needs to be amended or when you need to port that content into another location.

7. Develop an action-step-oriented marketing plan early, even before you're in the development phase. We certainly had the best intentions to do this, but the actual work of getting the app done seemed to vacuum up all of our time. In the end, we just had to birth our baby and imagine sending the cute pink or blue announcements when we had a moment or two to step back. Along these lines, I would add that including a marketing budget in your overall spending plan is imperative, even if you have to reduce the number of eye-popping effects in your app to accommodate some modest publicity costs. Can you hold back a few hundred dollars for a Facebook ad or for some clever print piece? It's worth it unless your business model relies on the "if-you-build-it, they-will-come" principle.

8. Be in it for the long haul. Some apps may have a complicated life AFTER they've been launched. Of course, it will depend on what kind of app you've built. Is it a crowdsourcing app or one that requires any kind of moderation of content, an app that uses a content management system which needs periodic updates and babysitting? If so, you need to think about *who* will maintain, review, and keep a general watchful eye on user-generated content and the CMS that manages it. If staff resources aren't available, will you have the capacity and the trust to involve an intern in the moderation process?

9. Think about numbers. What's your app worth unless you can determine how it's being used and who might be using it? App Store reviews are great--if you get them. What if you only receive four reviews (and they're not too kind)? Does that mean your project is an utter failure? First, you should define what success really means to you, and then you should have the ability to measure it. That's a rather meandering way of encouraging you to build some type of analytics into the app itself. At the end of day, you need some sort of analysis of what worked and why.

10. Look to the future. What do you want to happen when your app is getting a little grey around the temples? Do you want to let it live out its days just sitting around, or do you have the money and time to allow your product to evolve--based on user feedback, your own experiences with managing it, and a careful dissection of your analytics. Though it can be tough to convince others to keep a sort of rainy-day fund, a good practice is to hold some money back in your budget--with the idea that you may want to make changes to the app as time goes by.