# Best Practices for Developing and Launching a School App

Introduction

The K-12 education market - and parents and their children - are not immune to the impact that smartphone apps have made on a mobile society. According to the research firm Ipsos, 55% of parents of school-aged children own a smartphone, and no doubt that number will increase sharply as the smartphone market (as well as the tablet market) continues to grow. Parents are encouraged to download apps for everything from organizing play-dates, to tracking kids' chores, to planning menus.

It stands to reason that apps revolving around activities at their children's schools would be highly appealing to busy, on-the-go parents, who find they have less time to sit in front of their home computers but more time to view apps while they're commuting or waiting for kids at soccer games and dance classes. Schools who want to increase engagement with parents need to meet their audiences where they live - and, more and more, that is on smartphones and other mobile devices.

For schools, apps can do far more than keep parents apprised of sports scores and school lunch menus. They can help raise a school's profile and help shape its identity in a crowded education market where parents have many choices, including charter schools and private schools.
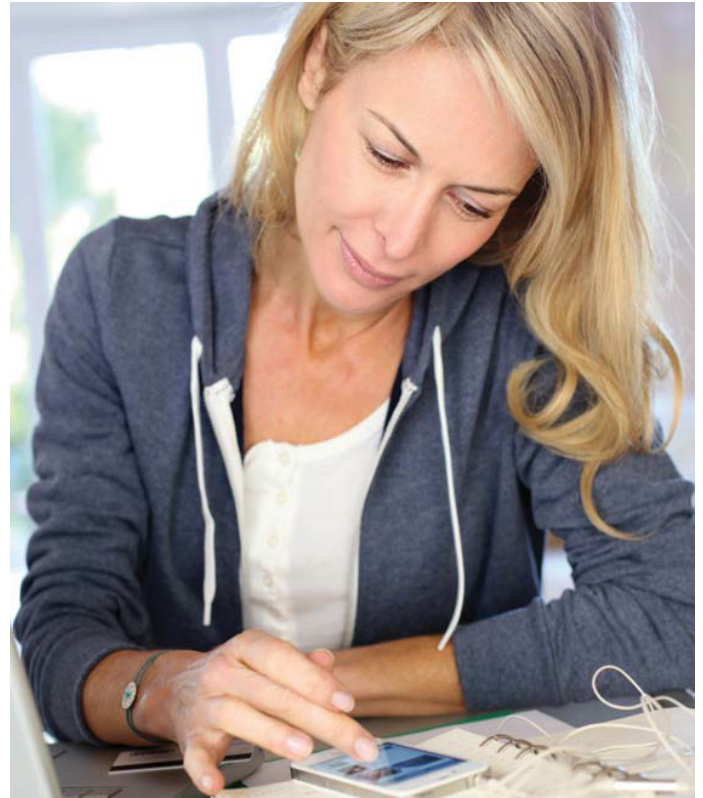
Apps help deliver a school's key messages - and at the same time, tell parents that the school is progressive and embraces modern ways to reach its community.
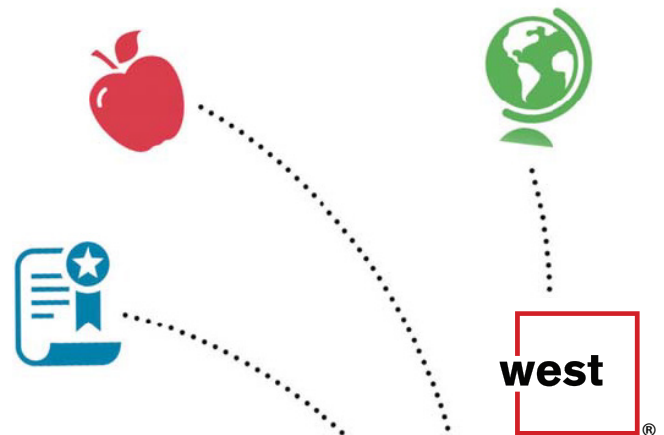
Creating and launching an app, however, isn't a quick weekend project. It's a big effort that requires careful research and planning, as well as strong technology partners, to launch successfully. But today, there's plenty of support for schools looking to undertake app development - the growth of the app market has meant that clear paths for development and management of apps have been defined.

If you're thinking about launching an app project for your school district, here are some best practices to keep in mind before you get started.

Choose the Right Content

Many an app has failed because it did not respond to audience needs. Think back to when you were creating your school's first website in the early days of the Web - simply launching a site because it was the cool thing to do didn't guarantee you an audience. It's the same with apps: Their success rests on giving easy access to the information the audience wants. This will vary by school and district—in some cases, your parents will be most interested in team sports. In others, lunch menus may top the list.

Front-end research is critical for this step. For example, you could canvass PTA members and ask them what information would be most useful in an app - or create a stakeholder survey form that asks respondents to rate different topics on a scale of 1 to 5. You can also examine your website analytics or RSS feeds to see which web pages and links are visited most often.

Don't forget about interviewing your staff. Even though they may not be the prime audience for the app, they'll no doubt have plenty of input about useful data to include. They'll also be the ones managing the app and uploading data, so they can tell you how easy it will be to access the desired info.

TYPES OF CONTENT

Content for your mobile app can be of several types, and can come from many places.

Examples may include:

➤ News
➤ Announcements
➤ Social media posts
➤ Menus
➤ Maps and directions
➤ Events
➤ Courses
➤ Schedules
➤ Grades
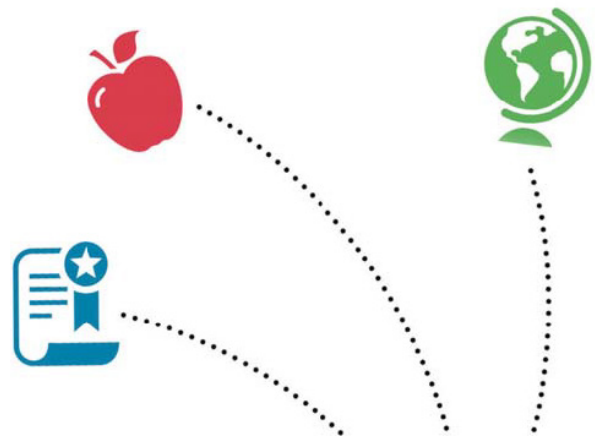
Custom App vs. Generic App?

One of a school's big decisions is whether to choose a generic app that is also being used by many other schools and districts, or a custom app that is created especially for a your school's or district's needs.

A generic app will offer fewer opportunities for customization. The "shell" of the app is essentially the same, no matter how many schools use it, so you app will look similar to the app being offered by other schools and districts. One advantage of the generic app is that it can allow parents to subscribe to content from multiple schools or districts in a single app, which is useful if they have children in separate districts or private schools. However, this advantage may only apply to a small number of parents and rely on those multiple schools having used the same app provider.

It's important to consider the back-end systems with which a district app will need to integrate, which can impact your choice of a custom or generic app. A custom app, and the technology experts that come along with its development, can solve the complex problems of exchanging information among disparate systems and making sure that the app displays the necessary data.

A key advantage of a custom app is that it will be displayed independently within the app stores of the various operating systems, and will be branded with a district or school's name and logo. This helps greatly with "brand recognition" among parents, and highlights the district's and school's adoption of cutting-edge technology.

Care and Feeding

Consider carefully how much upkeep you'll need to do in order to keep the app up and running, and to keep information flowing into it. How will you assign staff resources to this project? How much time will it take, and which departments need to be involved in maintaining the app?

You don't want the app to become a burden on existing resources - it should be developed in such a way that it has minimal impact on existing workloads. A well-crafted app should not require the hiring of additional staff to manage it - the app should essentially run itself and make it easy to flow various types of content into the app.

For instance, when the cafeteria staff publish new menus online, the menus should post automatically to the app. And when news is published to the school's website homepage, the same information should subsequently populate within the app.
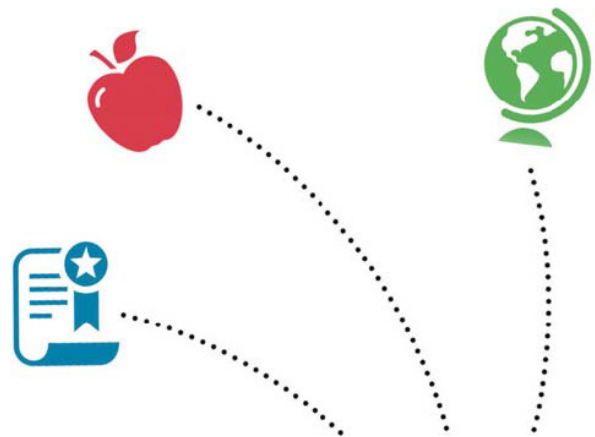
Launching the App Successfully

A terrific app won't have much impact if no one knows it exists. Once the hard work of developing an app is complete, it's time to grow an audience of followers:

- Promote the app's availability on the homepage of the district's website - in fact, consider creating a special web landing page that's all about the app. You can also introduce the app on your school or district blog.

- Submit the app to the app stores of major platforms, such as the iPhone App Store and Android Market. Your app developer should be able to help with this step.

- Use social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn to tell followers and connections about the new app.

- Create a search marketing campaign with top search engines such as Google, Yahoo!, and Bing.

- With the help of district marketing or PR teams, send a press release or media alert to local news outlets about the new app.

The best practices above will help your district or school steer clear of the most common missteps involved in developing and launching an app. They'll also help you avoid having to re-tool and re-launch an app that wasn't created according to audience requirements - no one wants to launch an app twice! Take the time to gather information about parents' "wish-list" for the app and staff requirements for data input, and you'll be rewarded with an app that's readily adopted and easy to manage.

Don't forget about interviewing your staff. Even though they may not be the prime audience for the app, they'll no doubt have plenty of input about useful data to include. They'll also be the ones managing the app and uploading data, so they can tell you how easy it will be to access the desired info.

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Founded in 1999, SchoolMessenger is headquartered in Los Gatos, California.

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