

Mobile apps are the fast and flashy choice, but mobile sites have virtues of their own

By Bill Siwicki

Mobile technology makes it possible for multichannel retailers to bring the web experience into the store in ways never before possible. This can be achieved through a mobile site or a mobile app. But which to choose if both are not an option?

Wet Seal Inc. opted for an app last year, and for a specific reason: multichannel integration is a high priority. While a mobile site is best for enabling end-to-end shopping—browsing, searching and buying—similar to what consumers do on an e-commerce site, an app is best for creating a vivid and eye-popping customer experience that ties channels together, contends Jon Kosoff, director of e-commerce and direct marketing at Wet Seal. The retailer launched the mobile app, built in-house, last year, and an m-commerce site, built by m-commerce technology vendor Digby, this year.

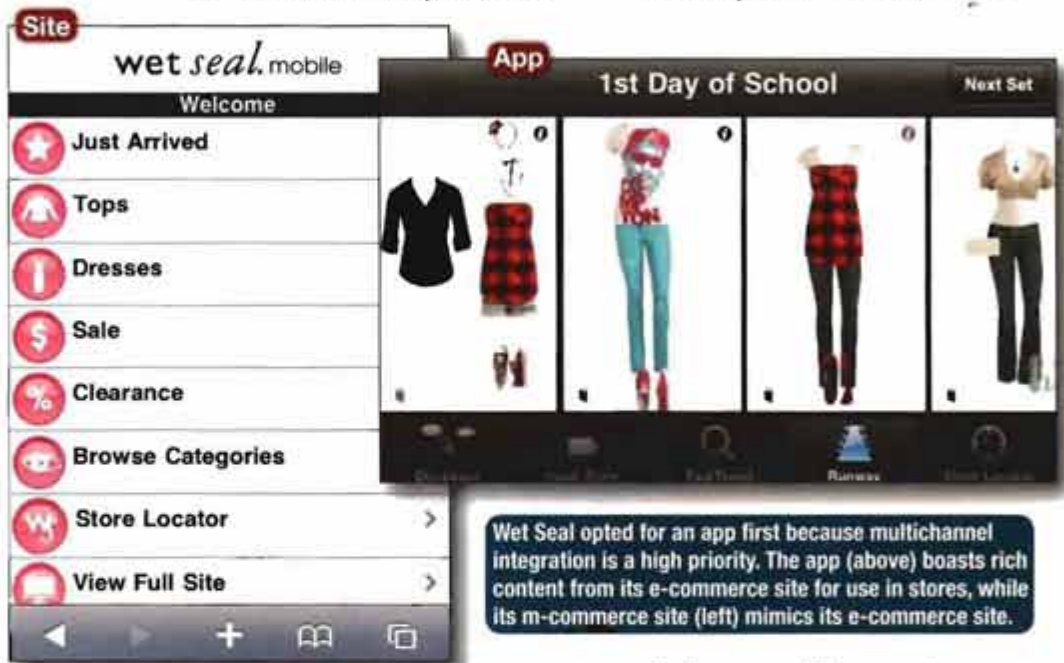
"The purpose of the app is to bring all of our rich content from our e-commerce site into the retail store environment," Kosoff says. That e-commerce site content includes iRunway, an online outfitter where customers can create outfits using any apparel the merchant sells and post the outfits for others to see. This, in turn, feeds the iPhone app. "We have more than 12,000 outfits in the iRunway. If a customer in a

store types into the app the style of a pair of jeans, they'll be able to see all the different outfits with those jeans in them. We're improving the multichannel experience and the mobile app helps us do that."

The app is the better choice for this feature, he says, because

into mobile commerce, it must first do some homework on both. It needs to understand how its customers access mobile content and what it is trying to achieve in the mobile channel.

"Figure out which mobile devices you want to interact with



app technology enables developers to store plenty of content on the smartphone and create a user interface that allows for a richer look and better performance—all without the need for routine and time-consuming page refreshes a mobile site would require.

Fundamental differences

M-commerce sites and apps differ in four fundamental ways: reach and discoverability, which favor sites, and experience and performance, which favor apps. If a retailer, travel company or other business must choose between the two as it moves

right now and focus on the questions of who your audience is, who do I want to talk to and what experience do I want to foster," says Bryce Marshall, director of strategic services at Knotice, a digital marketing firm whose specialties include m-commerce.

Reach may be the key consideration for many. M-commerce sites offer by far the greatest reach because they can be accessed by any mobile device with a mobile web browser. Mobile apps can only be accessed on smartphones, which represent about 20% of all mobile phones in use, studies show; and then, only on the smartphones for

m-commerce

which they were designed, which is a smaller slice (see chart below).

"A mobile site is right there, at the URL, just like on the Internet. It does not have to be downloaded, so the user is less likely to think twice about it before interacting with you," says Imad Mouline, chief technology officer at Gomez, an Internet and mobile measurement and performance management consulting firm that is part of Compuware Corp. "Also, any changes you wish to make take place immediately; you don't have to worry about users downloading new versions of the app."

Where are you?

And to access an m-commerce site, shoppers typically need only enter the same URL as the e-commerce site to be redirected to the mobile-optimized version. It's not difficult to find, unlike apps, which have to be discovered in app stores that are chock-full of the tiny programs, experts say.

"The biggest con with an app is discoverability—you have to get users to go out and download an app," says Steve Slezak, marketing director at Digby. "It's up to a retailer to notify users that the app is there and what it can do for them. When you hit Godiva's e-commerce and m-commerce sites, for example, there are links that inform you about their apps."

Omni Hotels wanted to ensure its guests, half of whom are highly mobile business travelers, could easily find Omni through their mobile phones. That is part of the reason the hotel chain launched a mobile site, in 2007, before launching

apps for smartphones in 2009. The site and apps were built by Usablenet Inc. Another reason was that it wanted a mobile experience that directly mimicked that of its e-commerce site.

"Everything you can do on our HTML site you can do on our mobile site," says Kerry Kennedy, vice president of e-commerce at Omni Hotels. "It's quicker and easier to get to market, and it hits all types of mobile devices."



Sites can be up and running more quickly and easily than an app because from a coding standpoint an m-commerce site can work smoothly with its big sister, the e-commerce site, whereas a mobile app requires its own, very specific type of coding as well as approval from a smartphone maker's app store, experts say.

A better experience

But it's the app that provides the better customer experience, though mobile sites can come close, most experts say.

"Using an app allows you to leverage all of the capabilities and features of the device where a browser restricts you only to the interactions you can do within the browser," Slezak says. "For example, you can integrate an app with the on-device address book. A browser cannot access that part of the device."

And because an app resides on the device, retailers can more easily incorporate graphical components, which typically bog down a site, experts say.

Apps' ability to reside on a smartphone gives them another edge over sites: better performance. Developers store the static elements of the program on the device so only dynamic information, such as product or pricing data, must be retrieved from a web server. This greatly reduces web server calls, which must be made with a site every time a shopper changes pages.

"And it's faster to start an app than it is to go to my browser and then click on the site and wait for it to download," says Mouline of Gomez. But, he adds, the new programming language HTML5 offers functionality that enables a site to work with some information on a desktop or mobile device. That, he says, may bridge the performance gap between sites and apps.

But there will remain differences between sites and apps. Retailers deciding between the two will have to choose between being easy to find and accessible to all, or a sleek, fast and cool experience. ●

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