

6 Principles of Successful mHealth Apps

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How many mhealth apps have you downloaded that you rarely use? Christopher Wasden with PwC's Health Industries practice identifies the cause behind it and defines the characteristics of successful mhealth apps.



Anyone who thought the term “disposable culture” only applies to physical objects should keep digital apps in mind. They’ve become the essence of “use once and throw away” thinking largely due to a flood of worthless apps.

Such apps are essentially novelties that pique the interest temporarily of those who downloaded them, but because they don’t deliver any real or lasting value , people quickly tire of them.

The medtech world experiences this phenomenon for a unique reason. Consumer interest in health, wellness and mobility is soaring, demonstrated by the demand for wearables that track fitness. But the business dynamics of health in the U.S. encourage worthless app development. The cause is deceptively simple – a developer perception that this is the way to avoid the regulatory hurdles of FDA scrutiny. The more “useful” an app is in a health context, the general feeling is that the more the FDA wants to scrutinize the function and claims of efficacy in keeping with its mission to ensure safety and effectiveness for the public.

The result? Ineffective health apps that can largely be considered useless. They may avoid FDA scrutiny, but they are quickly dumped on the digital rubbish heap.

We're firm believers in the critical role that mobile technology and software can and should play in improving healthcare delivery, especially in a new health economy where consumers want to take increasing responsibility for their wellness and treatment. Mobile health – mHealth, which combines social, mobile, analytic and cloud technologies – will play an important role in empowering those consumers – by putting healthcare control firmly on their devices and thereby, in their hands.

The core challenge for developers who want to succeed in this space is how to succeed with the customer, who is generally a consumer. That's a far higher hurdle than clearing the regulatory bar. The path to success is clear – first make your app useful, then let the FDA do its job and allow the approval process take its course.

What are the keys to success? Our analysis of hundreds of apps has identified six principles of successful mhealth apps:

Integration – An app has to quickly become seamless with the user's lifestyle and/or work practice. You want apps to integrate into users' lives and not create friction that interferes with use. More friction equals less use.

Interoperability – The app has to allow data to flow freely between different devices, the app itself, and on up to the cloud where the data is shared among a broader ecosystem with the goal of improving patient health.

Intelligence – Apps need to contain machine intelligence by replacing the need for human intervention with algorithms and analytics to provide insight. In essence, useful apps need to act as a "Clinician in a Box."

Socialization – Improving health generally requires behavioral change, and humans only change behaviors in response to interaction within a social system providing multi-levels of support in achieving shared goals. That can involve friends, family or support from health or wellness professionals. But the app needs to enable, support and encourage this process.

Outcomes – An app must focus on helping the user achieve specific end goals, and log those achievements. That means validating that healthy changes in behavior were made and that outcomes were achieved. Half of all healthcare costs and poor clinical outcomes result from unhealthy behaviors. Therefore, if we're not changing behaviors, we're wasting everyone's time. As the entire health economy shifts to reimbursement/reward systems conditioned on outcomes, being focused on outcomes is increasingly critical.

Engagement -- Ultimately, apps and devices must be so interesting, so emotionally satisfying, that users come back to them again and again. Gamification can play an important role here as that allows users to feel so engaged with the app that they're literally addicted to it (no health pun intended).

What apps, then demonstrate these Six Principles?

The best apps – in any context – are no longer considered just apps – but are true digital phenomena integrated into the lives of millions of users. Consider them communication platforms that are reshaping the media landscape as they encourage "second screen" viewing

habits and build like-minded communities based on providing users a daily fix of desired content.

In the healthcare space, the following are two examples of successful apps. Here are two examples:

WellDoc

- WellDoc doesn't refer to its BlueStar product as an app, but rather a Mobile Prescription Therapy. This FDA-cleared product provides personalized, real-time and long-term coaching for people with diabetes and also clinical decision support for their doctor. BlueStar monitors a patient's daily blood glucose management, medication adherence, and lifestyle choices, allowing the patient to better follow their physician's treatment plan and meet standards of care. All coaching is underpinned by clinical guidelines and behavioral science. The product works on most computers and mobiles and is reimbursed by insurance companies on the formulary basis similar to other prescription therapies.

Shire

- Shire developed its OnePath app to empower the small and well-informed community of Gaucher's Disease patients for whom Shire's drug VPRIV was intended. One Path tracks patient health metrics, provides real-time information to physicians and connects patients to dedicated case managers who streamline insurance health issues. OnePath also includes news, calendars, and "iGau," which helps patients track therapeutic goals.

The conclusion is simple – the medtech app world is not a "Build It and They Will Come" space – but a place where "Build Value and They Will Use It" is the mantra for success.

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