



Brad Churby, president, Omnispear Web Solutions. B2B Staff photo by Ty Greenlees

Does your business need a mobile app?

Local developers help stay ahead of the game

By Kyle Nagel
Staff Writer

We can trace the growing demand for mobile apps and the scramble by software development firms to supply them nearly to a single date.

It was June 29, 2007. On that day, Apple released its original version of the iPhone, a mobile phone and much more that had been widely anticipated for months and highly desired, evidenced by the estimated 50 million that had been sold by April 2010.

In the world of software design, it completely changed the game.

"It kind of reminds me of when the Internet was ramping up and Web pages were no longer seen as a novelty thing, and there was value to it," said Brad Churby, president of the Kettering Web development firm Omnispear Inc. "The iPhone app is no longer seen as a toy. It's starting to be seen as a necessity."

Beginning with the iPhone and continued with BlackBerry and Droid brands of mobile phones, tens of millions of non-tech-savvy people have access to and a desire for mobile apps, the miniaturized programs often used to quickly access information, serve a specialized purpose, play games or find navigation through the phone's global positioning system.

Because of that increasing use, businesses of all kinds are trying to learn how to better serve or find customers with these mobile apps. Churby and software engineers, meanwhile, quickly are trying to find ways to service those upcoming needs to stay up-to-date with the newest fads in technology.

"Once these many people have these devices, it

becomes important to have something to put on them," said Stefan Kyntchev, a software architect and mobile technology specialist for Strategic Data Systems. "It's the same way the iPod made MP3 players popular. The iPhone has made applications popular, and now everyone's trying to figure out the best way to use them."

Changing the game

Mobile apps, in fact, have been around for nearly a decade.

You know those hand-held devices the delivery service employees use to access their tracking system? They run mobile apps for that purpose.

Or the hand-held scanners at big-box retailers? Many of those use mobile apps.

The difference in the past few years, quite simply, is accessibility.

Because of the popularity of smart phones, mobile app stores are expected to generate \$6.8 billion in revenue this year, according to Gartner Inc., an information technology and research advisory company. By 2013, that number is expected to reach \$29.5 billion, the company said.

While many of those downloads — approximately 4.5 billion this year, an increase of 79 percent from 2009 — are recreational, business are trying to learn how to make their own products and help consumers find them in the app stores.

"By this point, you don't have to be a tech wizard to know how to browse the Web on a phone or download an application," Churby said. "So everyone's asking, 'What's the best way I can use that?'"

Serving the customer

For years, the Cincinnati Zoo has been actively pursuing opportunities in social media, whether it was Facebook, Twitter or YouTube.

Then, in the fall, officials began discussing the possibility of creating their own mobile app. After some in-house work and the hiring of a Texas company, the zoo placed its new app available for iPhones downloads in late April.

The Cincinnati Zoo app has several features, including access to photos, podcasts and schedules as well as a GPS-guided map of the facility. Experts say the zoo is making best use of the new technology: Making access to information and location finding easier on the visitor.

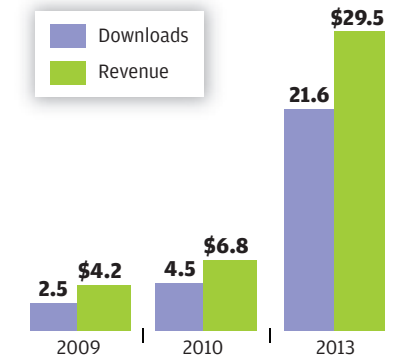
Plus, companies consider the entertainment value.

"I use it," said Michelle Curley, online communications manager for the Cincinnati Zoo. "It's a fun toy."

When considering a mobile app, Churby and Kyntchev

A drastic climb

Mobile app downloads are expected to increase by 79% from 2009 to 2010, and even more so until 2013: (All numbers in billions)



Source: Gartner, Inc. STAFF

said, it's best to think about what information a customer would need quickly, how to alert them to deals and specials and allow them to interact with other customers or employees. The Cincinnati Zoo app, for instance, allows customers to share photos. Also consider, they said, how to be entertaining.

The next step is finding a company to do the work. Many are still learning the art of creating a mobile app and working out the differences between apps for the iPhone, Droid and BlackBerry — which cannot run the same apps.

Many see the app wave as a recurrence of the website wave, when companies realized they needed an easy-to-use and informative site to help business. It's happening again, only this time with smaller and, some say, more useful applications.

"It's definitely the hot thing," Churby said. "The demand is growing, and everyone's trying to catch up to it."

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Bob Miller (left) CEO of Excellence in Motivation talks with CIO Greg Jones. B2B Staff photo by Lisa Powell