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IMPROVING THE APP STORE

On the July 21 earnings conference call, Apple Chief Operating Officer suggested that he has some ideas on how to improve the App Store. This is very good news. After one year and over a billion apps served, it's a positive sign to see Apple open to ways to make it even better. Suggestions on how to improve the App Store seemingly run the gamut but we're finding it harder to find new ideas lately as many are simply echoing the same solutions if not the same problems. We have a few ideas that we believe are new and specific. But let's recount what we agree on so far before moving on to, perhaps, additional insight we have as small developers.

Conventional Wisdom on the App Store

Speed the approval process

Yes, the approval process is too slow and apps are approved that should not while nit-picky bugs delay good ones unnecessarily. There is a lot more that can be done and we agree with most of the suggestions others have posted. Apple should simply hire more people to facilitate a better process. An FAQ blog would be helpful for developers so they can stay up-to-date on evolving standards. A chat with a reviewer function would also be helpful. The ability to schedule a call with a reviewer at Apple would be even more helpful.

Make it easier to find quality apps

Yes, current App Store categories are not helping customers find new and updated applications. Part of the problem is how we submit applications to the App Store, where we have to determine a launch date ahead of knowing when Apple will approve it for sale. Apple should simply remove this option and post the correct date an application is available for sale – when they say so.

Yes, we agree that it appears which apps are featured seems arbitrary. Apple does not feature enough non-games in other categories in their "What's Hot" and "New and Noteworthy" front-page sections to incentivize other applications other than dollar games. A quick look in iTunes or in the App Store on an iPhone or iPod Touch will leave users the impression that Apple is all about games and not much else.

We have run into this feeling from our customers who say their bosses are reluctant to let them buy software for their iPhones because they view them as toys. We've made the bet that the App Store is a better option than BlackBerry or Palm's offerings but Apple needs to do more to demonstrate to professionals that it is for real. If the App Store is going to evolve, Apple simply needs to highlight a wider variety of apps.

Low pricing is hurting quality and growth

Finally, yes, we agree with the most common complaint seems that App Store pricing is (1) great for customers but (2) bad for developers. Low prices lead to poor quality applications, limited applications, and others that are in such poor taste they hurt the Apple brand and everyone who is developing for it. The App Store has gone from Beer apps to Fart apps, and currently to Moron apps. Let's agree for a moment that for an elite brand like Apple, these apps are not aspirational and, in fact, are a disincentive for developers who want to provide quality games and solutions.

These apps are 99¢ or free and dominate the Top 25 lists. Solid games are limited because developers cannot justify more levels if pricing won't support it. We have to explain the value of our directories to people who are already buying out-of-date paper versions for multiple times the cost. It's a difficult environment and Apple is not helping themselves – remember they take 30% of each sale – or developers, or their own customers who get limited apps of limited utility.

Ways to Improve the App Store

So, what should Apple do that hasn't already been covered above? We do not have a monopoly on knowledge of what has been written but here are some ideas we haven't seen yet that would help push the App Store in the direction we all want it to go. Everyone who is involved with the App Store should want to:

1. Improve the quality of applications offered to iPhone and iPod Touch users
2. Improve the support of developers who are making brand-enhancing applications

Improve quality of applications offered

Problem: Users want high-quality applications but do not have an easy way of finding them.
Solution: Make it easier and incentivize developers to have relationships with their users.

A key part of Apple's brand promise is that they are in it for you. Apple hardware, software, support, and sales environments are designed to make it better for their customers. The App Store does not reflect this ethic. The current App Store is all about being number one by any means necessary. Want to be number one and make a quick million? Design a kitschy joke application. What if users don't like it and give it a one-star rating? It stays in the Top 25 as long as it sells, baby.

This is what we believe to be Microsoft's ethic, not Apple's. Microsoft's key brand trait is its ubiquity. Want to make sure the software you want to use works everywhere? Buy Windows. Want to work for a living? You need Office. Microsoft is Number One because Microsoft is Number One. The tautology holds as long as we all believe it.

Apple has never been about being number one for number one's sake. The 1984 advertisement was so compelling because it literally shattered what we thought we had to buy in the computer space. To this day, Apple's has elite design, elite support, and yes, elite pricing. But the App Store is anything but elite. It forces developers to consider where you will be ranked with the least number of features possible to achieve and keep that rank. It's Microsoft thinking and we suggest turning this on its head.

Redesign the App Store not about quantity (sales) but about quality (feedback):

1. Only feature applications that are at least 3 1/2 stars as rated by users

Apple should fully commit to quality by signaling to developers that if they will stand by their users and feature only applications that get high ratings. Low-performing applications with one or two stars are there for a reason: users hated them. These developers should not be rewarded with high rankings if they do not deliver what users expect to get when they buy the applications.

2. Modify the criteria to appear in the Top 25; 50% sales and 50% user ratings

The key problem with the App Store rankings right now is they appear to be based solely on sales. If you want sales, rank by sales. If you want quality, which increases sales, rank by quality. A 50/50 balance between sales and quality should do a lot to weed out applications that have no right getting the publicity they have.

3. Empower elite users to be Featured Reviewers and post their reviews at the top

Apple should incentivize in-depth reviews by "hiring" serious app reviewers and/or allowing certain reviewers top billing when they give feedback about applications. Amazon does a good job of this and Apple should consider some form of Top Reviewer status for people who do a lot of reviews very well. Think of the community that Apple

would build by providing this incentive. You could develop this group into a panel that can give you constant feedback on the store itself. Apple needs to utilize its user base, not just listen to the ideas running around Infinite Loop.

4. Allow developers to respond to negative reviews *filtered* by Apple staff

Yes, this is self-serving to a certain degree and has been covered by other writers. However, we believe that developers can improve quality reviews by allowing them to respond to users who might flame an app for no good reason. Everyone is entitled to his or her opinion but developers also should have a right to respond to inaccuracies. The best way to do this is to allow developers to do this if they have proven quality apps. Again, the key is to give an incentive for quality.

5. Add a way to view applications by price range so users can shop for higher quality applications

We agree with the hemming and hawing on price. Our applications sell at a premium so we are never going to see ours high in the rankings unless Apple promotes them like they did for four magical weeks earlier this year with Congress+. Instead, we believe Apple should put together price categories, which would allow those who price their apps higher a clearer chance to be noticed. If all games are 99¢ it's hard to be seen. If you price your app at \$9.99 like many of the best games do initially, you'll get noticed. This elite group will garner more attention and for a longer time, perhaps giving an incentive to continue development to justify price.

Improve developer support

Problem: Developers get limited ongoing support from Apple on how to provide quality apps
Solution: Provide more ways for developers to distinguish themselves and earn that support

Apple, to their credit, operates the App Store processes in an egalitarian way ... most of the time. The process to submit an application is the same whether you are Electronic Arts or Cohen Research Group. Everyone uses the same portal, there is a review, and apps get rejected or approved. Apple makes its own decisions on which apps to feature and for how long, seemingly without developer input. We all have to deal with this.

However, some developers get special treatment and this is actually a good thing. We simply want more of it. Firemint should get preferential treatment for their outstanding RealRacing application. EA Sports should get highlighted when Tiger Woods golf comes to the platform. Applications like Things and iBird Pro should get more publicity from Apple, not less. Apple should be much more aggressive in highlighting applications that do things in a new, more efficient way. Games that push the platform forward should be rewarded. Those that simply catch our attention for being stupid should be ignored.

Here are some ways quality can be improved through a stronger relationship with developers:

1. Encourage small developers to pitch the application to Apple for marketing support

Every company should have a shot at giving Apple an angle to market its software. This would be an improvement over what we have now since no one really knows why they're chosen for "New and Noteworthy" other than the result. If an app has a new feature that does something great, it ought to be rewarded. Even if it's not new, it can be noteworthy.

2. More consistent standards of approval and rejection

The best way to do this is through transparency (like our blog or FAQ wish) but Apple is not that kind of company. Instead, it would be better if the internal training of app reviewers were more streamlined so that applications are approved and reviewed by the

same people who initially allowed them in the App Store. Ideally, Apple would arrange its review team to focus on specific kinds of applications so that gamers could review games and reference-loving geeks can review apps like ours. The more they specialize in an area, the more consistent the reviews.

3. Provide *suggestions* as well as rejections when applications are submitted

Ideally, once you had teams of reviewers who were specialized in a particular group of apps you'd want to hear feedback from them on how to improve. Right now as a developer all you get is a thumbs up or thumbs down. The process is designed to serve the store, not quality development. Frankly, I'd love to hear more from a reviewer about their experience with our applications. I'd like to know what they thought was good, and what was lacking. Who else would know better how to improve quality than an Apple reviewer? If Apple chose to partner with us in this way I'm sure quality would improve.

4. Give more developers the right to design their pages in the App Store with approval

One of the neat things about applications that are supported by Apple is that the pages themselves are stylized. Those pages stand apart from the rest and appear to have a seal of approval from Apple, suggesting you buy it. We think Apple should allow more developers that option if they have met some standard of quality either from reviewers or from user reviews. The opportunity to design the information page on the app should be a way to reward quality development.

5. Allow developers to post demonstration video links instead of just screenshots

Developers who are committed to their art will take this opportunity to show off their apps. Screen capture software is not very expensive, even for small developers like us, so that barrier is small compared to having the opportunity to view in QuickTime a demonstration of your application. This helps users determine whether or not the app fits his or her needs much, much better than screenshots or descriptions alone. It will help separate developers who are serious from those just trying to market themselves into millions.

Conclusion

The Apple App Store is an amazing resource for developers and users. It has elevated what a simple mobile phone or iPod can do and should be able to do. Again, Apple is on the leading edge of that kind of change. They have defined a new market and we are all fortunate to have the ability to shop there. But creating the market and selling a billion or so products should not be enough for Apple. Apple should strive in its market for what it strives for with its own products.

Apple's elite brand should refocus its attention on what it does best: offering quality and innovation. The App Store needs to move away from quantity and back to the core promise Apple makes with everyone. Apple should recommit to its users that apps in their store are great, not simply work correctly. All of us will benefit when Apple focuses our attention on quality apps, not just those that get a laugh for a buck.

Our sense of it is that Apple should refocus on users, their wants, needs, and feedback. Apple should push its developers in overt and subtle ways back to the notion of quality. As other platforms arise, the differentiator will be quality, not quantity.



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