



Market growing for Savannah-centric mobile apps

The market is growing for Savannah-centric tourism-related applications

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By Adam Van Brimmer

If you're interested in anything Savannah — events, attractions or otherwise — there's an app for that. Or there will be soon.

Savannah-themed mobile applications are growing like kudzu in the online apps stores. Most are tourism or event related, from directed walking tours of the historic district to festival guides. But local apps pioneers say the future — and sooner rather than later — will see apps reach into most corners of Savannahians' lives.

"We're moving toward convergence," said Lee Heidel, whose Heidedesign created an app for the 2011 Savannah Music Festival. "Phones went from something to use to talk to something to get information from. Now we'll see more and more and in some unexpected places."

Like at the gas pump (discounts), the checkout lane (shopping list) or at a stoplight (traffic info). Mobile app potential for businesses is as great today as the Web was 10 years ago.

A handful of local service providers have already introduced apps, including Savannah Toyota (service department information), Savannah State University (school information) and Chatham Emergency Management Agency (emergency information).

"Businesses using apps see them as an extension of their brand, as a way to promote themselves," said Smack Dab Studios' Hannah Byrne. "And with all the features on the device now, like the camera, GPS, tag reader, there's so much you can do."

Going mobile

Mobile devices are gaining on more traditional computers as Web surfing tools.

According to a recently released study by comStar, a company that analyzes digital trends, 47 percent of U.S. cell phone users access the Internet via their devices. Almost half of those consumers are between the ages of 18 and 34, yet the fastest growing demographics are teenagers and seniors.

Such growth has local Web development companies, like Heidedesign, Smack Dab Studios and Tour Buddy, evolving their business model to incorporate app development. Their focus is broader than the local market, but they see Savannah-centric apps as a good way to enter and experiment with the market.

Smack Dab's first foray into mobile apps was the 2011 St. Pat's Day Guide, which included details about the parade route, event schedules, directions to parking, restrooms and restaurants and profiles on parade participants.

"Our goal was to get our name out for Web development in the community, and I'd say about every other day we get a call about doing an app," Byrne said. "That success has changed the whole focus of the business."

Tour Buddy's owner, Yvonne Jouffrault, is looking for the soft spots in the burgeoning local mobile app market. She did a walking tour app, one of several available in that genre, but also has an app specifically for children's attractions and activities around town.

There are more app ideas where that one came from, she said.

"Savannah, given the growing community of tech-savvy businesses and individuals, coupled with over 7 million visitors a year, we think it is an under-apped market," Jouffrault said.

Unlimited potential

Mobile apps, because of their portability and usability, will gradually reshape how Americans conduct their everyday activities, Heidel said.

A growing number use the Web to bank, pay bills, schedule appointments, find their way from place to place and watch TV and videos. The next frontier is the device as a mobile wallet, already a popular function in Japan, according to the comScore report.

And more and more smartphone users are shifting toward apps and away from the mobile Web, comScore reported. App usage grew to 34 percent in 2010 and is now almost as prevalent as mobile browsing (36 percent), the report stated.

“These multi-function phones with touch screens have really changed the ballgame,” Heidel said. “You can use the device in a way that’s much more human. Usability used to be a major impediment because learning to use the device was so frustrating. Now the learning curve is a lot shorter. You look for an excuse to use the phone to do more things in your life.”

Incorporating as many functions as possible in the simplest package is vital. For example, HeidelDesign’s Savannah Music Festival app allowed users to buy tickets, learn about venues and performers, view and listen to archived performances and connect via a social media channel.

The potential for other local festivals, businesses, trade groups and civic groups to utilize apps is unlimited. Restaurants could use apps to take reservations, update specials and post customer reviews.

Business associations could direct customers to their member shops and firms via apps. Municipalities could share and update information with residents and visitors alike through apps.

“This is just the tip of the iceberg,” Jouffrault said, “given both the rapid increase in smartphone usage and the increasing trend for users to access information via apps instead of the Internet.”

GEORGIA HISTORICAL MARKER

An interactive map and history portal sponsored by the Georgia Historical Society, the app uses GPS technology to help users locate approximately 1,000 of the 2,000 historical markers located around the state, 200 of which are in Savannah’s historic district.

Cost: Free

Designer: Smack Dab Studios

SAVANNAH FOR KIDS

A quick reference tool for parents looking for ways to entertain their children, the app highlights 20 fun places including museums, playgrounds, state parks, indoor play centers and public areas.

Cost: \$1.99

Designer: Tour Buddy

SAVANNAH ST. PAT’S GUIDE

A where-to-go and what-to-do app for the annual festival, the guide included details about the parade route, event schedules, directions to parking, restrooms and restaurants and profiles on parade participants.

Cost: 99 cents

Designer: Smack Dab Studios

SAVANNAH MUSIC FESTIVAL

A virtual guide to the recently concluded 2011 event, the app included performer and venue listings, a ticket-buying portal, an audio/video performance archive and a social media channel to push ticket specials, updates, etc.

Cost: Free

Designer: HeidelDesign

SAVANNAH WALKING TOUR

A GPS-enabled tour experience, the app highlights 22 spots of interesting downtown Savannah, from the stories behind the city's grand mansions and hidden gardens to its most haunted secrets.

Cost: \$9.99 for full version; free for "lite" version

Designer: Tour Buddy

SAVANNAH ITOURS

Self-guided walking tours to several Savannah attractions, from Bonaventure Cemetery to River Street, the apps use GPS technology and narration.

Cost: From \$5.50 to \$14.99

Designer: CityTrex