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17+ apps revolutionizing store aisles

Ways to dial into
your customers'
smartphones and
make your store
more interactive



Do you need your own app?

Designing an app for your store can be pricey—we found quotes starting at \$15,000 for a multifunctional app with Internet connectivity, interactive features, multiple screens and a full database. But it's not a good idea to cheap out—Casey Ayers, president of Jacksonville, Fla.-based app-developer MegatonApps, warns retailers away from companies selling “app wrappers,” which basically just bundle your website's content into an iPhone-friendly interface. “All these do is display web content,” he says.

Instead, Ayers recommends using existing apps for maximum benefit. But if you decide to partner with an app company, experts recommend you don't sign anything more than a month-to-month contract. The technology game is changing rapidly, and you don't want to be tied to a loser. Another option is to hire a social-media strategist or app company for a few hours of app strategy. Consultation rates range from \$75 to \$150 an hour.

If this all seems a little daunting, do as retail consultant Debby Swoboda suggests: Find an enthusiastic business intern to help run your growing social-media empire, or ask your iPhone-carrying Gen-Y cashier to help you out for a few hours a week. But beware that in the rapid-fire public-relations minefield of blogs, tweets and twits, it only takes a few careless words to create problems. “It's like hiring someone to run your cash register,” Swoboda says—choose somebody loyal and socially savvy, and don't forget to give direction. —L.S.

Lora Shinn

Apps, shmapps. If you've dismissed this new craze as just something that the kids are going on about these days, think again. Interactive applications on mobile devices—Android, BlackBerry, iPhone—are a hit with wide segments of the population, from mopey teens to old money. Soccer moms use apps to hunt down coupon deals, college kids love them for social networking and foodies use apps to design a week's worth of meals. Can you afford to ignore the app revolution?

Here are the top types of apps your customers are using and how you can take advantage of them, whether through cutting-edge technology or old-school marketing.

✳ Epicurious, BigOven, Ucook, Jamie Oliver 20 Minute Meals, Vegan YumYum Mobile and other recipe apps

What are they? Foodie consumers use these apps to create weekly menus, build shopping lists and whip up new recipes. **Why should you care?** You may be

able to choose a favorite natural-recipe app or chef's app and tie into it, suggests Debby Swoboda, a Stuart, Fla.-based retail marketing consultant and founder of askdebby.com. For example, make signs that highlight ingredients used in one of the recipes on the widely popular Epicurious or BigOven apps (provide the full, correct recipe name) so app-savvy customers can cross reference that recipe.

✳ TweetDeck, Hoot Suite and other Twitter apps

What are they? These apps help the millions of Twitter users post their every thought, otherwise known as 140-character tweets. Hardcore Twitter fans may be tweeting from your store while shopping—everything from discovering a new product to experiencing poor customer service. Users also like the immediacy of one-day Twitter deals.

Why should you care? They're a great way to monitor your brand and offer in-store incentives (a free cup of coffee for anyone who tweets inside your store, for example). Hoot Suite is a favored mobile and desktop Twitter application for business, as it allows you to track whenever

your store is mentioned on Twitter, along with scheduling your own tweets. “Hoot Suite will help you understand perceptions and misconceptions about your organization or service, and give you a chance to respond conversationally with links or facts,” says Alan Lewis, director of special projects at Lakewood, Colo.-based Natural Grocers by Vitamin Cottage.

✳ Whole Foods and other retailer apps

What are they? The Whole Foods app allows shoppers to look up recipes (including special diets like gluten free and vegetarian), craft shopping lists and create meals using what they already have on hand—even if it's only a sprouted onion, limp carrot and bag of beans.

Why should you care? Don't feel pressured to make your own app, but note how the Whole Foods app creates a seamless shopping-and-cooking experience. For busy weeknight shoppers, can you create a display featuring quick-assembly meals and a checklist-style recipe card? Could customers email your recipes and shopping lists from your website? >>

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Foursquare, Gowalla and other social geolocation apps

What are they? These fun apps allow mobile device users to "check in" at a business to earn coupons and free items. They're like a cross between a customer-loyalty card and a game.

Why should you care? Seattle-based PCC Natural Markets uses Foursquare to reward loyal customers and encourage infrequent shoppers to visit again. Every third time they check in, PCC shoppers

score a free doughnut. "It's one of the best things for a small business," says Ricardo Rabago, PCC's social-media specialist. "We're playing on a level field that we didn't have in the past."

Grocery iQ, Shopper, FoodScanner and other grocery-shopping apps

What are they? These apps let customers create grocery lists by store, category, brand and even aisle. Shoppers love them

because it's simple to save, share and edit weekly lists. Some apps also offer coupons and UPC scanners or even track calories.

Why should you care? These apps make shopping so easy, some consumers won't enter your store without them. Help your app-addicted customers by posting aisle-by-aisle store maps on your website; shoppers can use them to customize their grocery app. You might also ask customers to let you know if they can't find a favorite, recurring list item that they must buy at a competing store.

Price-sensitive shoppers use apps to find coupons in hometown stores.

Yelp review app

What is it? A popular consumer-rating and Yellow Pages-like app that mirrors the online Yelp site. If a smartphone user enables her phone's geolocation element, nearby businesses (like yours) will pop up, making it easy for new-to-town visitors to find you.

Why should you care? With anonymous users commenting on your store and uploading photos, you may want to monitor these posts (good and bad) and add in business details. "Yelp is very cool," Swoboda says. "You want to make sure customers talk about you on Yelp." Not only talk, but talk positively.

Simply Organic and other manufacturers' apps

What are they? Consumers use manufacturers' apps to learn more about favorite products, download coupons and discover recipes.

Why should you care? Many of these apps have geolocation features that allow users to find the nearest stores that carry a manufacturer's products. Once the smartphone user is in your store, it's easy to point out (using signage) that an app has a clever recipe for rosemary, soy milk or any other product you want to feature. "More manufacturers will be having apps," Swoboda says. "They're building their brand, story and product." Your store serves as the bridge between the app, the customer and the product.

Groupon, RivePoint and other coupon apps

What are they? Price-sensitive shoppers use these apps to find coupons in hometown stores. Groupon is a little different than other coupon apps—customers must gather interested friends to qualify for a coupon, a system the company calls "collective buying." If the group can activate the coupon, they'll score serious deals.

Why should you care? Coupon apps almost always require retailers to pay, but companies like RivePoint offer a way for you to get involved in the smartphone revolution at a low cost (around \$50 a month). Groupon gets new customers to discover your store through major deals only available if enough people buy.

Freelance writer Lora Shinn shops for her agave, yerba maté and tempeh strips in Seattle.

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