A blueprint for the killer (ordering) app

All signs point to the pizza industry's further adoption of the mobile application ordering on both sides of the counter. Online ordering as a whole typically comprises 20 – 30 percent of pizzerias' sales, but ordering via mobile phone applications specifically plays an ambiguous role in that number.

"I do not know of any (current) consolidated data for mobile phone, as this is still in its infancy," said Robert Ancill, CEO of The Next Idea. "But (our company) is projecting an 80 to 100 percent growth in mobile phone order generation for 2010 — and it may extend over 100 percent in 2012 and 2013."

The top guys are still perfecting and implementing sales in this venue: Ancill says Dominio's has tripled the number of customers who have opted to receive coupons via mobile phone. And in September of this year, the company reported that they had doubled mobile sales from the previous year, with four months still left to go.

But what does it take for other pizzerias, small and large, to replicate and continue early successes? At this point in the game, it's all about user experience.

The philosophy

Even pizza's big players are still having trouble understanding what makes a "killer app," mostly in the realm of developing optimal usability – the aspect that can most likely make or break an application's success.

Take the example of **Papa John's**. Tech writer Sarah Perez editorialized in August that what the company had deemed a failed iPhone app launch – despite its having driven an extra $1 million to the company – was actually a mobile Web site formatted for the iPhone rather than a true app.

The difference? The platform's app interface merely allowed customers to order off the basic mobile ordering system, eschewing all the added shortcuts an iPhone allows. It's this added convenience that could pay off big for mobile ordering.

Jeff Scott echoes that sentiment. Scott is editor of 148apps.com, one of the most popular app-rating sites on the Web. He recommends utilizing iPhone-specific benefits to keep customers coming back to the ordering venue.

"With a mobile app, you have the opportunity to make things simpler because you can identify the user a lot more accurately than you can (on the Web)," he said. "(You can tie) phones to an account, so when a user has entered his credit card info, you don't need to ask for it again. An iPhone can also tell your location. You probably can't get the accuracy of an apartment number, but you do have the closest cross streets, which they ask for a lot in ordering."

The other main benefit Scott urges operators and developers to take advantage of is push notification, which can alert app owners to special deals.

"Let's say the local baseball team has a big away game starting in three hours. You could push a notification timed right before the game to your app owners, when people are looking for food to take along the way. There are all kinds of things you can do like that to push out special offers and one-time deals."

The prototype

Once operators adopt the right app approach, it's time to nail down the finer points of its interface. And what better institution to emulate than the king of pizza—and its apps?
Pizza Hut's esteemed mobile ordering app has been out for less than half a year. Yet it's made over $1 million in sales for the giant since

its release in July – and gained two Mobile Marketing Association awards, as well as the top spot on Forbes' Best Apps of 2009 list.

The app developer's prescribed goal was to translate the company's Web site to the iPhone, but also "create something fun that users could engage with," Pizza Hut spokeswoman Andrea Nowack said.

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The result is a build-it-yourself interface that allows users to change pizza size with their fingers, "shake up" wing orders to mix in their favorite sauces, and store and retrieve coupons from a virtual fridge. When a user is done ordering a pizza, they are prompted to play a racing game to kill time before their meal arrives.

If such frivolity is seen as just that, take a gander at what dominates the lists of top iPhone apps: solitaire, pinball and word games. In short, fun.

"The iPhone really is a fun device," Nowack said. "If (the Pizza Hut app) were just a simple online ordering tool, it wouldn't have the same impact. Part of the reason it has gotten so (much coverage) is because of its fun appeal. Apps that stand out are more enjoyable."

Again, Scott agreed with the application's particular appeal.

"It makes people want to come back and reuse the app — much like one that is utilitarian but fits the need of the user will also do for a different reason. Maybe if (users) play with the animation long enough, they will get hungry for pizza."