



ERICA SADUN
STEVE SANDE



Pitch Perfect

The Art of Promoting
Your App on the Web

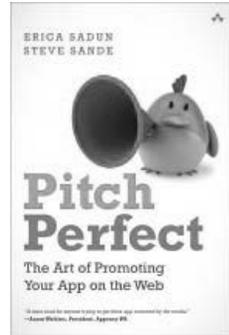
"A must-read for anyone trying to get their app reviewed by the media."
—Aaron Watkins, President, Agency PR

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Praise for *Pitch Perfect*



"Great advice on pitching bloggers. Get it now, devs."

—Steve Streza, Lead Platform Developer, *Pocket*

"A must-read for anyone trying to get their app reviewed by the media."

—Aaron Watkins, President, *Appency PR*

"*Pitch Perfect* should be required reading for anyone who is trying to understand the ins and outs of getting press coverage for your app."

—Brian Akaka, Founder, *Appular Mobile App PR*

"As a long-time indie app publisher, I felt like someone had finally lifted the veil over what really goes on in the minds of the reviewers at a major blog site."

—Ken Landau, Co-Founder, *mobileAge, LLC*

"This book is fabulous. I wish I would have read it three weeks ago. It would have saved me some embarrassment. I haven't been able to put it down since I started."

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"As someone who works in app PR on the other side of the fence, *Pitch Perfect* gives a fascinating insight into the world of bloggers I'm looking to excite!"

—Rob Shoesmith, Marketing & PR Executive, *MEDL Mobile*

“There are tons of great mobile-programming resources, but very few great resources for app marketing. Erica and Steve do a fantastic job in their book *Pitch Perfect* explaining in detail the best way to raise awareness for your indie apps. I have virtual yellow highlighter all over my copy!”

—Elia Freedman, CEO, *Infinity Softworks*, Maker of powerOne Calculators

“Before iMore, I worked for over a decade in marketing, and I can’t stress enough how important it is, and how often developers and manufacturers either forget to do it or simply do it dead wrong. If you’re a developer or a manufacturer, especially an independent or a kickstarter, do yourself—and us bloggers—a favor and check out *Pitch Perfect*.”

—Rene Ritchie, Editor-in-Chief, *iMore*

“This book illustrates the intricate relationship between product developers and bloggers so well that I can almost hear David Attenborough’s disembodied voice narrating the complex dance.”

—Carl E. Moebis @ *iBackFlip Studios LLC*

Pitch Perfect

The Art of Promoting Your App on the Web

Erica Sadun • Steve Sande

◆◆ Addison-Wesley

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This book is dedicated to all of our fellow bloggers at TUAUW, with a hearty wefwef and a hug. You are our attract point because we certainly aren't blogging for the money! With warm thoughts and good wishes, we \$opportunity_name_alt this for you.



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About the Authors

Erica Sadun (@ericasadun) writes lots of books and blogs at TUAW. When not writing, she's a full-time parent of geeks who are brushing up on their world-domination skills. According to her academic dosimeter, she's acquired more education than any self-respecting person might consider wise. She enjoys deep-diving into technology and has written, co-written, and contributed to dozens of books about computing and digital media. Sadun has also blogged at Ars Technica, O'Reilly, and Lifehacker.

Steve Sande (@stevensande) is considering an intervention to heal his addiction to writing. He's the Hardware Editor at TUAW and has written millions of words for the blog. Steve has authored numerous books for Que, Take Control Books, and Apress, is married to a rocket scientist, and spends his days being bossed around by a cat. His gray beard and baseball cap can be seen every Wednesday afternoon at 5 PM ET on TUAW TV Live (<http://www.tuaw.com/tag/tuawtvlive>).

Sadun and Sande are the founders of Sand Dune Books and co-authors of the best-selling *Talking to Siri: Learning the Language of Apple's Intelligent Assistant*.

We Want to Hear from You!

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Foreword

When the App Store debuted, there was the inevitable gold rush toward this nascent smartphone app market, which Apple helped make more accessible to everyday developers. As time goes on, developers can no longer rely on being familiar with code alone to sell their hard work online. As usual, if you are a small shop, you have to wear many hats. The marketing hat is not a comfortable one for many developers, but it's critical to getting your message to your customers.

Erica and Steve have just about seen it all when it comes to marketing. While blogging at TUAW (The Unofficial Apple Weblog), they have received hundreds, if not thousands, of press releases, personal pitches, and offbeat marketing ploys. Over time, they've synthesized what they've seen work and what they've seen fail, and what they've come up with is in this book.

I think you'll find the advice in this book useful if you're out there alone, trying to send your app into the world. By using this book, you'll pay careful attention to the pitch you craft to tell your own app's story—and with a little luck, you'll find success on the App Store.

—**Victor Agreda, Jr.**, Editor-in-Chief, TUAW.com

Preface

You just spent months developing your product. So, why are you spending less than ten minutes promoting it?

Reviews from popular websites can make or break you. Having your product featured on a top website in a positive light turns sales from lackluster to blockbuster. Some entrepreneurs work on their apps and hardware to the point of exhaustion, spending insane hours building, testing, and tweaking. Then, they send in weak, quickly written pitches that fail to sell their excitement and showcase the fruit of their efforts. These two-minute emails and months-in-development ideas quickly move from a blogger's inbox to the trashcan rather than getting featured on the front page of a site.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for anyone who's spent months sweating to create a product, whether building an app or bringing a tech-hardware product to market. You've expended all that effort to perfect your wares; now, take the time to learn how to market it effectively. If you have an app or device that you're planning to bring to market, this is the book you need to read.

This book offers simple and practical advice with real-world examples. The topics discussed help you strengthen the way you think about promotion and marketing. You'll see where other developers have gone wrong and where they've gotten it exactly right, lessons that you can apply to your own marketing.

In this book, you learn from experts and noted bloggers Steve Sande and Erica Sadun about the successful pitch. You discover how to effectively position your product, build relationships with blogs and bloggers, and sell your product's story. Although you won't be guaranteed positive reviews, you do learn how to avoid many of the most common pitfalls that send your message off-track.

Why Pitch Perfect

Chances are pretty good that independent developers who are just starting out don't have deep pockets for a beautifully orchestrated marketing campaign. They need to be extremely clever about getting the word out to the public in the most cost-effective way possible.

Developers, both software and hardware, need bloggers to help promote their efforts and broadcast new releases and updates. Bloggers need product developers because without a topic to write about, blogs get really boring really fast.

Bloggers want to love your product. In fact, we want to love your product as much as or more than you do. There's nothing we like better than becoming fans of a new and outstanding app or accessory.

Finding that new hotness is the addictive pursuit of those of us who write for online tech sites. Each day, we sift through mounds of the boring, ordinary, and just plain bad.

When we discover something that sparkles and makes our pulse race, we reach for our keyboards. It's a real high to be the first kid on the block to play with something that's innovative, different, and excellent.

More than that, however, we have an urge to share our excitement. We're technology's natural evangelists and gossips. Forget about hidden gems; we want to post to our daily audiences of hundreds of thousands of regular readers and tell them about the new goodies we've just found.

To be a blog reviewer is to endlessly explore the mediocre in hopes of finding those few outstanding items. The app that uplifts us, the accessory that helps us use our systems in new ways, the game that becomes addictive, the utility that we can't do without... these are the treasures that we're endlessly on the hunt for.

Unfortunately, we cannot uncover those great finds without your help. We are overwhelmed by the daily minutia of countless review submissions. Unless you take the time to lead us to your product, to take us by the hand, to talk to us in small easily understood phrases, we're probably going to miss the greatness of what you have on offer.

When dealing with bloggers, you must accept a few basic facts:

- We are overwhelmed.
- At best, we have the attention span of a 3-year-old.
- We are always under deadline for some other write-up that takes priority over yours.

In other words, as a key audience for promoting your product, bend over backwards to get us to understand what you're saying and make us pay attention to you. Communicate the value of your product quickly, effectively, and succinctly.

Enter this book. *Pitch Perfect* is all about how to communicate with bloggers. It takes you through the process of review, discussing how your product enters the flow, what happens along the way, and how you can best ensure that you create the best possible relationship with your reviewer.

Think of this book as a blogger “care and feeding” guide. It reveals the ins and outs of the real world that lies behind the home pages of websites and helps you navigate common pitfalls.

How This Book Is Organized

Pitch Perfect uncovers the veil behind blogs and shows you what really happens on the road to your product’s review. Here’s a rundown of what you find in this book:

- **How Blogs Work**—This chapter introduces the daily basics of real-world blogs. You learn where your pitch ends up at the other end of the email chain and what happens to it from there, as reviewers evaluate whether they want to bite or not.
- **The Attractive Product**—A review is a subjective thing and yet certain universal truths apply, regardless of who does the evaluation. Discover what qualities reviewers are looking for, and learn how to integrate these into your development plans from the very start, not just when you’re ready to go to market.
- **Crafting Your Pitch**—Clear communication is the heart of your pitching story. Even the best products can be overlooked when you fail to express yourself succinctly and comprehensibly. Learn what elements go into a good pitch and how to put them together to create effective communication.
- **Pitching Do’s and Don’ts**—As bloggers, we see people make the same mistakes over and over. This section shows you how to bypass common pitfalls that can endanger your marketing success.
- **Case Studies**—Good pitches excite, intrigue, and engage. Bad pitches, at best, amuse. The examples in this chapter highlight both successful pitches and the ones that need improvement. You see what works in each of these pitches and what needs a bit of attention as we share real-world examples of pitches from our inbox.
- **Preparing for PR**—From websites to videos, pitches are more than just a simple email. In this chapter, you read about the supporting material that helps you market better and more successfully.
- **The Care and Feeding of Your Blogger**—Not every review is a good one, and not every reviewer loves what you have to offer. Here are some simple strategies that you can use to respond to both good and negative coverage and build a working relationship with bloggers.
- **Worksheets and Checklists**—Make sure that your product is ready for marketing using these handy worksheets.

In this book, we provide our accumulated knowledge about how to develop effective pitches. As long-time tech bloggers, we've seen our share of short and sweet pitches that capture our attention and shared a good laugh at some dismal failures.

We'll share tips on how to help your pitch avoid inbox deletion, describe ways to keep tech bloggers in the loop about what you're working on, and point you in the right direction on maintaining good relations with the public and the press.

Ready to get started? Read on to learn the ins and outs of a successful website pitch.

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How Blogs Work

Thinking about marketing your product? Prepare for a whirlwind. You're about to enter an ADHD world that's limited on attention span and desperate for new and exciting hotness. You've got to be sharp, focused, and exactly on point, because your opportunity to present yourself is even more fleeting than you might imagine.

Each and every blogger alive is tragically short on time. Bloggers always have too much mail to get through and too little time to give each product the attention it deserves. This is the core truth about our work lives. You'll need to catch a blogger's interest in just a few seconds.

That tiny interval of time when you pass across that blogger's radar is critical. It's the one chance you have to make that first impression and sell yourself and your product. Are you ready for that moment? For that second?

We bloggers are dying to find the product that we're going to absolutely love. A blogger's golden chalice is represented, for example, by an app that stays on our phone and is used constantly, or by the must-have accessory that makes our lives easier and more fun. It's the t-shirt that everyone wants to buy or the Etsy item that redefines a whole market space.

Bloggers love to discover and then gush about that discovery. That passion is what blogging is all about.

A Typical Day at a Major Blog

We work at a major tech blog, part of AOL's network. Every month, we deal with millions of readers, with all the joys and headaches that involves. Being a blogger is an amazing experience. It allows you to network with all kinds of readers on a scale that personal blogging can't. We connect, we analyze, we offer opinions, we create reviews. It's a privilege for all of us and an unparalleled opportunity, but it's one that demands a lot from the blogger. Blogging is not a low-stress occupation.

Our typical day at The Unofficial Apple Weblog (<http://www.tuaw.com/tag/tuawtvlive>) (see Figure 1-1) begins like this. We grab breakfast, arm ourselves with steaming hot cups of coffee or cans of Mountain Dew, and sit down to sort through the press releases that arrived during the night. That sounds like a pretty easy way to start the day, right?

Wrong. At TUAW and most of the other large tech blogs, we're inundated every day of the week with a flood of press releases. It's not just a dozen or so; in a typical weekday, we look at well over a hundred PR blasts, all of which are trying to get us excited about a specific app or accessory. But, that's just the start.



Figure 1-1

Steve and Erica blog at The Unofficial Apple Weblog, www.tuaw.com.

Review Requests

Press releases arrive from a variety of sources, including individual companies and distribution services, like PRMac (<http://prmac.com/>) and PRWeb (<http://www.prweb.com/>). Many developers work on a shoestring. They don't have the money to spend on these press release services, which distribute to hundreds of news outlets.

Instead, most Apple developers pick a target group of blogs (usually those like TUAW with a huge readership) and email them a direct pitch. Besides TUAW, popular Apple review sites include macworld.com, macrumors.com, arstechnica.com, 9to5mac.com, engadget.com, theverge.com, imore.com, mactech.com, macobserver.com, ilounge.com, macstories.com, appleinsider.com, and cultofmac.com, among many others.

But, pitching isn't limited to just our world. Product developers should build their own roster of interest-related blogs. For example, many Etsy sellers and deviantArt artists work with sites like io9.com, neatorama.com, themarysue.com, blastr.com, geeksofdoom.com, and laughingsquid.com. Political writers might focus on getting their books mentioned on salon.com, dailykos.com, instapundit.com, and so forth.

Email pitches transform our morning flood into a roaring torrent of breathless descriptions of new, unique, and absolutely amazing apps and accessories. This raging stream continues throughout the workday.

Sadly, most products aren't new or unique. Press releases are often poorly written. They flicker in front of our glazed eyes for only a moment before we click the button that sends the message to trash. Add in the notices from some developers who find it necessary to send out full press releases for every minuscule version update to their apps, and it's easy to see why we're overwhelmed.

Our goal is not to depress you, but the honest truth is that out of every hundred PR blasts we see, at most, one or two products get reviewed. Most press releases get a look over and then move straight into trash. A very low percentage of these requests continue on to posts on our site.

For developers, exposure on major websites provides an essential component of business success, even if it's not the complete answer to that success. Even a glowing review on TUAW or another major website cannot guarantee your app a spot in the New & Noteworthy category on the top of the iTunes App Store or create a bestseller on Amazon.

Regardless, it always helps developers to place their product in front of a large audience. We often hear from developers who say that they received a huge bounce in sales from a single post on TUAW. We call it the *TUAWlanche* effect, and we're delighted when products we've championed find their audience and achieve success.

Smaller Blogs

How do you find minor blogs as well as the big name ones? Consider hopping into iTunes or Amazon, surveying competing products, and discovering where their pull quotes from good reviews originated.

At the same time, weigh the time and effort against returns. TUAW blogger Kelly Guimont points out, getting the word out to every small blog possible might take more time than you anticipate and, in the end, you “find out that both their readers already bought your product. You could have spent that time crafting a glorious pitch for Engadget instead.”



NOTE

Any blog that replies to your pitch asking for a fee to “expedite review” is a scam. Avoid them.

Making Sausage: How Reviews Happen

“It’s too bad that none of the apps I get pinged about are really of interest to me, and often downright sloppy. The first step to making it big in the App Store should be making a good app, methinks.”

—Brett Terpstra, TUAW blogger, web and app developer

“I don’t know that app developers and marketing managers are really aware of what a really good review takes out of a blogger and how even though they may be giving us a \$6 app, or even a \$60 keyboard, my time and energy is worth so much more than that. Even if the “work” is fun, it’s still testing and putting something through its paces and it’s still work. I run a small consulting business and a family. It’s really hard for me to justify giving away free or really low-cost advertising for someone else. My family and my health come first, and my friends, too! This is why I’ve had to scale back my review posting, but I really want to get back into it, just in a healthier way.”

—Melissa Davis, TheMacMommy (<http://www.themacmommy.com/>)

To better understand how bloggers decide what makes it to the home page and what gets thrown into the email trash, consider how bloggers actually put together their reviews and what they’re looking for. It’s a bit like making sausages.

The end product is a lot prettier and tastier than the process itself might indicate. Otto von Bismarck once said, “If you like laws and sausages, you should never watch either one being made.” The same advice goes for doing reviews. Trying to find good review fodder among the onslaught of pitches can be a frustratingly inefficient process.

What Do Bloggers Look For?

Bloggers live for the product that is exciting, newsworthy, different, or extremely useful to write about. When a product doesn't fit one of those criteria, it's likely to be overlooked. At TUAW, we deal mostly with apps and accessories. While we focus on Apple-related software and hardware, other blogs might cover books, automobiles, fashion, photography, and other merchandise.

What we have to say about the *way* we in which we review items transfers to these other arenas. The experience of human excitement is universal. So, if you're reading this book and you create Café Press and Zazzle items or you are an author trying to get your book reviewed, adjust our criteria accordingly. These apply to other blogs, other products, and other interests.

Here's a list of what we specifically look for in apps. Certain qualities jump out and make us take notice. The kinds of apps we want to review offer these features.

An *exciting* app is either completely unique (something quite rare) or achieves its utility in an attention-grabbing way. An exciting app makes you stop, think, and react. They inspire a "wow, that's cool" reaction. There are hundreds of thousands apps in the App Store. "Me too" apps make our eyes glaze over whenever we see the press releases for them. The exciting app? That's what we live for.

We recently found an app that scanned automobile VIN numbers and instantly offered wholesale and retail pricing estimates, including Bluebook values and more. Within an hour, nearly every blogger at TUAW had downloaded that app and used it to scan their car. That kind of app is exciting, or as one of our readers put it, "Erica, Thank you for this article! This is one of the most useful apps I've ever downloaded! It is so easy to use and provides great information with little effort." That is what we look for in an exciting app.

Newsworthy apps fit into a larger story. When an app fits an ongoing narrative that's caught the attention of the blogosphere, it provides a coverage hook for bloggers. This allows us to tie app coverage concretely into current events and promote that app as part of the story. During the Hurricane Sandy floods (no relation to co-author Steve Sande), we actively looked for apps that supported offsite backup to help guard against natural disasters.

When a developer transforms a pedestrian concept to create an app that achieves its goals in a new way that is faster, better, more connected, or just plain more fun, we sit up and take notice. *Different* matters. There's no reason for developers to mimic the functionality and even the UI of every other app in its category, so why not start by creating something that's special?

If you do, and if your press release is focused on pointing out the advantages over competing apps and showcasing features that aren't available anywhere else, you're going to get our attention.

To be fair, one infamous app was designed to let users text and drive. It offered new and different functionality, and it did its job well, but we dismissed it in the end—it was suitable only for Darwin Award winners.

Function matters, too. We don't care how pretty your app is if it does something *extremely useful*. Yes, an ugly app with a bad UI that does something amazing *can* win our hearts, like Ambrosia's Snapz Pro X. It's an OS X screenshot utility with all the design aesthetics of the former Soviet Bloc. But, we reviewed it positively when it finally updated for Mountain Lion. Apps that improve our lives and help us get things done are always welcome. If your app creates some functionality we haven't seen before and does it well, that's going to catch our eye. At least it usually will.

Developer *devotion and commitment* also play important roles, especially when an app or product offers complex features and/or synchronization capabilities. In exchange for product investment by users, be prepared to step up to the plate on a regular basis with updates, bug fixes, and improvements based on user feedback.

Why Do Bloggers Review?

Blogs are an advertising-driven business. We write posts including news, reviews, and help articles to attract a large audience. We want to grow that audience so we can sell ads on the site for revenue. Without the ads and audience, we're not getting paid.

But, it's not just about business. Bloggers are addicted to writing and to community. We love discovering things and telling people about them. In the case of tech bloggers, it's all about the latest thing. There's nothing we love more than getting excited about a new app or tech product and sharing that excitement with others.

We blog because we're curious, because we love trying things out, and because we love talking about the experience of trying things out. We serve an audience that wants to know whether an item is a good buy and/or a great value. The audience wants to know what new apps are worthy of a spot on their home screen or a place in their gear bags.

There's so much information, so little time. We serve those who let us do that job for them. To the reader, it's a free consultation; a chance to pick the brains of an IT professional.

**NOTE**

During a recent podcast, we were asked if we made special exceptions to review products from “superstar” celebrity developers. Our response? Hell yes! Celebrity drives page views, and page views drive our paychecks. It may not be fair, but it’s a fact of life.

Attracting Readers

We attract readers by writing about new products, including apps or accessories. Readers want to know the details about a product—things like the price, availability, and features. They also want opinion. Bloggers help entice them to purchase the product or warn them to steer clear. Blogging isn’t journalism. It’s opinion writing flavored with passion and personal experience.

When an app is really awful, we usually pass on the opportunity to review it. Most bloggers won’t go out of their way to trash a new app that doesn’t make the cut.

Providing Criticism

Steve once had a developer who wrote a wonderful pitch about his educational app. The application *sounded* great, but when loaded and launched, it was one of the worst he had ever seen. It was filled with misspellings, the user interface resembled an unsolvable puzzle, and some of the text was so small (and non-resizable) that it was unreadable. To top it off, the app repeatedly crashed.

The app was essentially an amateurish attempt to repack old CD-ROM content for mobile devices; it was awful. Rather than embarrass the developer publicly and potentially ruin any chance of him ever selling another app, Steve wrote him a personal email telling him of his concerns for the app, explaining why he wasn’t going to review it.

Although Steve provided constructive criticism, the developer remained adamant on one point. He truly believed his app was really well done. It wasn’t. Several horrible reviews were subsequently published by other blogs, proving that it wasn’t just Steve who found the app awful. We hope that the dev decides to fix the glaring issues with his app.

Most bloggers aren’t out there to make you feel like a failure. For the most part, we point out the good and not-so-good features of your product in their reviews. We want to provide valuable information to our readers, not make fun of you or other product developers. You can best help us by crafting items

that we're going to be enthusiastic about reviewing. Always send in your best work.

Product developers who listen to blogger criticism and use it to improve their products are much more likely to receive the repeated attention of bloggers in the form of reviews. Developer Saied Ghaffari of It's About Time Products (<http://www.helloiat.com/>) creates training and other apps for Apple's iOS and Mac platforms. Steve made a comment in one post several years ago noting that the name of one app—"It's About Time: Learn the Switch to Mac"—was a mouthful and difficult to fit into a blog headline.

Recently, Saied pitched a new ebook and app, and both had succinct names: "Hello Mac OS X" and "Hello iPhoto." He pointed out in a conversation with Steve that he had listened to the feedback and took it to heart. Did it make Steve feel good that a developer had responded to criticism in a positive way? Sure! Did that positive response color Steve's decision to review Saied's new products on TUAW? Absolutely.

How Do Bloggers Perform Evaluations?

When a blogger evaluates a new or revised product, it's generally because we saw something that really caught our eye. Something "popped." It grabbed our attention and made us take notice. At that point, we often ask for a review unit or, in the case of apps, a promo code, but we do so with no guarantees or promises attached.

Making these requests doesn't always mean that we'll write about it. Remember that subpar app Steve looked at? He received a promo code, but applied that admonition we all hear from our parents: "If you can't say anything nice about a person, keep quiet."

That doesn't mean we don't publish negative reviews. We do. Sometimes, we do this because we have a point to make about the app or its quality. More often, we do because we have an editorial calendar that requires service. You cannot commit to an iPhone-, iPad-, or Mac-App-of-the-Day without writing up *some* app.

For the most part, bloggers prefer to skip products they don't like as well as the vast oceans of the mediocre. Doing so is not always practical, especially in a daily business where content drives readership, readership drives ad views, and ad views drive paychecks.

For many bloggers, reviews are a daily fact of life and, as much as we would prefer to highlight the special, the terrific, and the exceptional, we spend a lot of time navigating the common, the tedious, and the adequate.

Performing the Review

So, how do we evaluate? We can't speak for all bloggers, but we'll give you an idea of the process we personally use for reviews. We start with app reviews. A discussion of hardware reviews follows in the next section. If you're coming to this book with a different kind of product, make sure to read both sections because they contain hints as to how reviews take place on real-world blogs.

Our evaluation begins by looking at the description of the app on the App Store. Has the developer provided a concise description of what the app does? Does the pitch include screenshots or a video that shows off details of the user interface in action? All these items make a good—or bad—first impression on us.

We install the app. Do we run into any difficulties installing the app? Apps should load quickly, launch perfectly the first time, and provide a fast and simple setup. We note when the app crashes the first time launched, or if we can't get the app configured in a few minutes.

Next, we use the app in the manner in which it is intended. If it's a game, we'll see if it grabs our attention and holds it for more than just a few minutes. Steve was sent an "Angry Birds" clone to review that looked pretty darned good at first glance. After a few minutes of play, he found that the app would occasionally skip levels for no known reason, and he quickly reached a level that he could not win. Frustration set in, and he soon stopped using the app. It didn't get a glowing review.

We look at when the app was last updated. If it's been several months to over a year since an update was issued, we question whether the developer is devoted and committed to utilizing user feedback to make improvements or provide stability in an ever-changing operating system ecosystem. Would you enjoy eating stale bread?

When the app is complex and/or expensive (over \$4.99 U.S.), we check if it offers a free or "lite" version. Many users want to take apps for test drives before making long-term commitments.

We look to see how the app fits within a developer's related offerings, not just as a standalone item. Are all the good bits of the app hidden behind in-app upgrade pay walls? Is the app covered in advertisements or cross promotion? Those are usually hints that developers are looking at users as cash cows, not valued customers.

Then, there's data entry. How well does the app safeguard your data? Entering data demands a huge investment of time; an app needs to be reliable and offer data backups, exports, and imports, perhaps via iCloud or Dropbox. Does it do that?

Basically, we look at the app holistically, as if we were the target users testing it out in the most common conditions we can manage. We run it through its paces and try to use it in as near real-life conditions as possible.

What About Accessories and Other Hardware?

We approach hardware reviews with the same steps as we do software, but we try out each product out using as many real-world conditions as possible. We bring the item into the field and use it as the developer recommended. We feel it, manipulate it, and try to give it a full workout in the ways we think it might encounter during normal use. If you say that an iPad case is completely waterproof, we're going to test that claim, even if it means that we're risking ruining our expensive hardware for a review.

We're looking to see if the hardware is well made. We check to see if it's easy to break. Most importantly, we try to decide if the item does what it promises in the marketing text. Does it fulfill the basic utility promised by the vendor?

Many items that sound like great ideas on the website when you're clicking Purchase don't work as well in real use. We pay attention to battery life, connectors, durability, and convenience. If a battery booster weighs 5 pounds, you're not likely to carry it around in your pocket with your phone.

The endpoint of hardware reviews is to provide an evaluation of whether the product is solid and offers good value.

Elements of Review

The kind of item you ship off for review can influence the style of the review that takes place. Because we work a lot with apps, let's explain that in an app context. Here are some ways we treat various app categories.

Business apps are always a challenge to review. If they're focused on a specific task and do that well, they'll receive a good review. Apps that try to do too many things usually end up doing nothing well. There's an online small-business accounting service, Kashoo (<https://www.kashoo.com/>), that Steve has been using for some time. The iPad app acts as a mobile frontend for this service. It's easier to use than the online service itself. In his estimation, that's worth a good review.

Photo apps tend to be one of two types: those that help you take better photos through a different frontend to the built-in cameras of new iOS devices, and those used to add effects to those flawless photos. There's one issue with the latter type: There are just too many apps that try to do the same thing. What makes one of these apps stand out? It's one with lots of effects, the ability to tweak effects, and a clear user interface.

For the frontend type of photo apps, two specific products jump out as perfect examples of what bloggers love to hear about. The first is Camera+, which is a photo-taking and editing app that first gained notoriety when it was kicked out of the Apple App Store. That was newsworthy, but the continuing additions of new and unique features to the app make it something worth writing about again and again.

The second app is Occipital's 360 Panorama, which was the first panorama app to use the gyroscope and accelerometer built into recent versions of the iPhone and iPad to take seamless, automatic panoramic photos. The distinctive way that the app enables anyone to create and view beautiful panoramas by just waving an iOS device around caught our attention in the crowded field of photography apps.

Another big area for apps is *social networking*. There are way too many Twitter apps on the App Store in our opinion, especially since recent iOS and OS X releases embrace Twitter and add support for the official app. Yet, there is still a place for Twitter apps that add features that aren't found in the eponymous app. If you can differentiate your app with a new twist on Twitter API feature, you can grab a good review.

Tweetbot from Tapbots LLC is an ideal case of a Twitter app that goes well beyond the built-in functionality and adds features that make the app well worth more than the \$2.99 purchase price. We eagerly anticipate news of updates to this app, and it's never failed to surprise and delight our blogging team.

We could go on through all the different app genres, but we hope you get the general idea by now: quality and uniqueness matter. That applies no matter what product you're developing and what blog you're submitting to. Instead, here's a summary of some of the things we focus on as we perform a review.

Graphics and Design

When a product provides adequate functionality, beautiful design and colorful graphics can give it a slight edge in a review. Be sure to make your app look good and make text readable and clear. The same qualities apply to hardware. A well-designed unit, with intrinsically beautiful and well-made features, makes us sit up and take notice.

Even a distinctive app icon can make the difference in whether or not your app attracts the attention of a blogger. Several of the TUAW bloggers chose the Tweetbot icon (see Figure 1-2) as a favorite, because it's eye-catching and represents the robot theme inherent in the Tapbots line of apps.



Figure 1-2

Tweetbot's icon is eye-catching, smart, relevant, and memorable.

Here's another idea: Use a color other than blue for your app icon. A vast majority of app icons seem to use the same blue background, which makes it difficult for users and bloggers to discern a difference between apps. An icon that is colorful and describes at a glance what your app does can go a surprisingly long way toward snagging a review.

User Interface

An app or device that presents a clean and intuitive user interface wins, in our opinion. It doesn't matter what the product is designed to do; if the UI makes sense, follows standard UI guidelines, and we can figure out what to do with it in seconds, it's going to get our attention.

Take the Clear app, for example (see Figure 1-3). It's a to-do list manager with a superior and colorful multitouch UI, and it has gained lots of fans. That kind of interface differentiation can, and will, catch our eye.

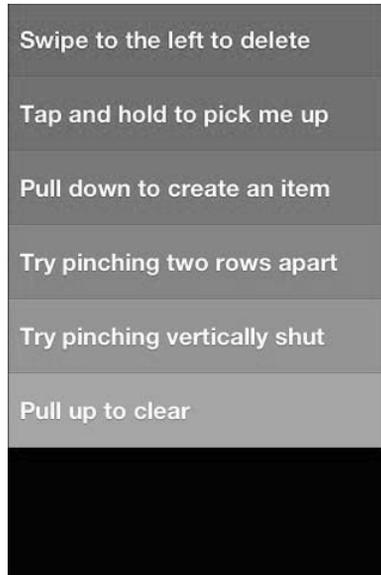


Figure 1-3

Clear offers a terrific example of excellent GUI design.

Visual design extends beyond apps, of course. It's one of the key components for any product on the marketplace. A brilliantly designed poster will sell, as will a well-crafted kitchen gadget. Good design always engages a reviewer.

Value

Does a product provide exceptional value for the money? Steve purchased and used a PDF markup app for his iPad that cost \$9.99. One day, Erica told him about another app that was free during the introductory period, had a beautiful and easy-to-understand UI, and had more useful features. If you think we were excited about this app, you're right.

Value doesn't mean cheap. The Mac's dictionary offers this definition, which is perfect: "the worth of something compared to the price paid or asked for it." The PDF markup app won't always be free. But, even at a price equal to its competitors, it would provide more value as it has more utility and an outstanding user interface.

If your product offers excellent value, it will find its audience and appeal to a reviewer.

Utility

The dictionary describes utility as a noun, meaning, “the state of being useful, profitable, or beneficial.” When discussing the utility of a product, we like to compare it to the adjective “useful, especially through being able to perform several functions.”

Food Network TV host Alton Brown often derides certain kitchen utensils for being “uni-taskers” that take up space and have only one use. He loves kitchen gadgets that can be used for a variety of purposes. We feel the same way about products that let us do several things and get rid of other products.

That’s not to say that a product that performs a single task very well won’t fit the bill when it comes to utility. If it is very useful and does the job it is designed for with flair and finesse, we usually give it a good write-up. Any additional tasks it can perform are often icing on the cake and functions that raise a good product to excellence.

Settings

Settings are, admittedly, a software-specific quality, although other products can suffer from an excess of user-tweakable features. Nothing irritates reviewers more than apps with too many settings and no explanation of the benefit of each one. If an app takes too long to set up before it’s useful, we’ll usually quickly remove it from our devices. Apps that have well thought-out settings that can be made or changed in a few moments make us happy.

Apps that lead a user through a quick setup and tour process on the first launch receive a thumbs-up from Steve. If an app is set up properly in the first few seconds of use and the developer then points out functions of interest, the app is more likely to be explored by the user than become a confusing nuisance that takes up home screen real estate.

One other thought about settings: Think about where you put them. Many new and experienced iOS users completely forget to look at the Settings app (see Figure 1-4) when they’re using an app. Place as many of your settings into the body of the app as you can, and avoid hiding them in the Settings app. These days, most developers limit their Settings entries to legal notices.



Figure 1-4

Although Apple provides a centralized Settings app, many users are unaware of its existence and how it is used to adjust settings for a number of apps.

Options

Another criterion that bloggers consider while reviewing is whether options (upgrades for apps, accessories for hardware) are available. Developers can provide a “base” app that performs a certain task well, and then make optional features available to customers through “pro” versions of the app or in-app purchases.

We’re okay with being able to try out an app at a minimal cost, then adding functionality by going “pro.” This pricing structure is often known as the “free-mium” model, with developers giving away the base app, and then charging for additional or premium features.

In any case, the base app or base product has to stand on its own. Nothing irritates us more than a product that spends its time trying to sell more stuff. If your product looks more like an ad than a solution, you’ve lost our attention.

Features

Looking at the dictionary again, features are defined as “distinctive aspects or attributes of something.” In terms of reviews, features are those items that set apart a product as uniquely different from its competitors.

A feature can be a capability that nobody has achieved before, a beautiful and unique design, or a different way to perform a function. Products with features that are useful, functional, and well-designed make reviewers take notice.

Erica recently reviewed a series of smart dongles that integrated with the iPhone (the Wallet TrackR). She loved that, in addition to being able to find your keys on demand by sounding an audible alert, the unit would remind you if you walked too far away from them. This passive “you forgot your keys” feature made a huge difference in the way she appreciated and reviewed the product, and it excited readers who plan to use the device to make sure they don’t leave their overcoats behind at restaurants.

Finish

Too many products are rushed to market before they’re fully finished, debugged, tested, refined, and polished. If you feel a push to just “put something out there,” rethink your strategy. A rushed product is a bad-review magnet. Your later updates and sales may never recover from an initially flawed launch.

If you find yourself sending letters like the following on a regular basis, you’re missing the point about adding product finish:

Thanks for taking the time to review [app]. We learned a great deal from your critique and integrated many of your suggestions into the application, resulting in a product that provides a more efficient “Getting Things Done” analysis.

[A long list of features that have been changed]

My hope is that you will update your review after giving [app] another try. As a thank you, I’d like to offer a link to share with your visitors that will allow the first 30 visitors to download free versions of [app]: [url].

Sadly, most blogs rarely revisit a review, no matter how kindly you ask us to. If we think your product has promise, we may offer early criticism via a phone call or email and invite you to resubmit once the product is more likely to receive a better review. Take this offer seriously.

I also think that it's very important that developers make sure that your app is completely polished and ready for release, before actually releasing it. Too many times, I see developers release an app that they are 80% happy with, as they see the potential down the line with updates. Unfortunately, reviewers are only going to look at the current incarnation, not the potential.

—Brian Akaka of Appular, on TUAW Marketing Chat 2010 (<http://www.tuaw.com/2010/01/15/tuaw-livechat-promoting-your-app-store-products/>)

Steve, as the hardware editor at TUAW, sees another finish problem on a regular basis: the hardware prototype. In this situation, manufacturers eager for a review send a prototype of a product to a blogger.

Although the products are usually close to their final form, there can be the occasional quirk with a prototype that needs to be worked out. Even worse is the case where we ask the manufacturer when the product will become available, and they basically have no money to do a production run; they're hoping that the publicity they gain from a great review will entice their backers to reach into their wallets for more funding.

Trust us; we'd rather write about a product that is in production. If you're having issues with getting enough funding to produce a product in sellable quantities, perhaps you need to rethink your plans, find a new backer, or consider crowd-sourced funding through Kickstarter (more about that later).

How Much Time Is Spent Reviewing Each Product?

Quality matters. The better a product is, the higher the probability is that a reviewer will really "look under the hood" and search out each and every feature in it. A product that excites reviewers receives lots of hands-on love. A poorly developed one that breaks down, crashes constantly, or has an unusable user interface gets quickly tossed.

Consider apps. Unique concepts, fun games, or social-networking apps that engage the reviewer (and by default, anyone who installs the app) are often apps that we use religiously in the future. One recent example was a unique health app/service called The Eatery. Steve decided to give it a spin.

This app and service obtains crowd-sourced opinions of how healthy you are eating. Steve decided not use the app permanently, but thought that it would be interesting during the testing to have a number of opinions on how healthy his eating habits were. He decided to keep the app on his iPhone 4S and use it for a few weeks.

This long-term use gave him a really good feel for the app, the service, and how the crowd-sourced food scores worked. Had he just based a review on the look and feel of the app, it would have received a good review. The experience of working with the app over a period of time gave insight into things he liked and hated about it. His total time spent using the app? Probably two hours in total.

That's one end of the spectrum. On the other end are special-use products that are created for a small niche market. While we try to match bloggers to the product, sometimes a blogger will find that she or he is not familiar with the use that the item is designed for. What happens with those? Usually, they just get a cursory review of features and design, without the detail that a really in-depth review requires. In a case like this, your product may be given only 15 minutes of attention. And that's a shame if it's really worthy of more love.

What Kind of Timeline Crunch Are Reviewers Under?

At TUAW and many of the other large blogs, we have an editorial calendar for reviews (see Figure 1-5). That means that we get information about products, but we have several days or weeks to use it prior to writing a review. On the other hand, if a product is considered to be "hot" and is getting a lot of attention from our competitors, we try to get a review out as soon as possible, often on the day of release.

	Mon 3/26	Tue 3/27
	Daily iPad App: Artogram	Daily iPhone App: Video Star
GMT-07	Daily iPhone App: BattleLoot Adventure	
5am		

Figure 1-5

Many sites now use a review schedule.

Do we rush reviews? No. Our goal is to provide a fair-and-balanced review for our readers, so we'll try every feature, try to resolve any issues ourselves, and talk with the developers if something really odd is happening. We give just about every product the attention it deserves. Remember, we want to provide our readers with a service that they'll keep coming back for. If they find that they're reading a poorly researched and hastily written review, they won't be back.

How Long Does It Take to Tell You're Trying Out a Lemon?

After looking at probably several thousand apps and a huge number of accessories, we can tell pretty quickly if an app or accessory is a “keeper” or if it’s heading toward uninstall or the hardware giveaway pile (see Figure 1-6). Many times, that first impression takes less than a minute. If the product shows even a bit of promise, we’ll go further and try out more of the feature set. Apps that are junk get deleted immediately.

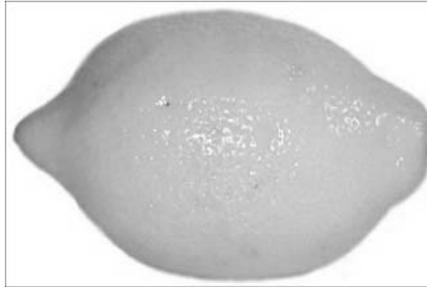


Figure 1-6

A lemon (*Citrus limon*) quickly calls attention to itself during initial review.

The product tells us its story. If it crashes or cannot be used from the get-go, that story ends quickly. If it engages us and invites us to continue using it, our testing can go on for hours. With hardware, that testing can even go days or weeks.

The very best products are the ones we jump into our chat room and tell each other about. “You’ve got to try this” means we’ve got a live one on the hook. For those kinds of products, your review may receive input from several bloggers, all of them testing it out, often on our own dime.

If you can get bloggers to go out and buy your product just so they can contribute to a review write-up, you have a winner on your hands.

What Kinds Of Reviews Do Bloggers Write?

Bloggers don’t usually write just one type of review. There are several ways that we can approach information about products that are pitched to us.

We use these different styles to create a variety of write-ups on our site.

Depending on your product and what we consider to be its newsworthiness, it may receive one or more of these posts.

First Look

The simplest write-up is what we call a *first look*. A first-look review is generally written when we get an app or accessory that is “hot” and we want to give readers some information about it as soon as possible. This type of review covers the bare essentials that a reader needs to know: what the product does, how much it costs, any special features (like accessories or in-app purchase, different levels for a game, etc.), what it compares to, and what the developer is well-known for (if he’s written a number of apps or shipped other hardware). First-look reviews often get a follow-up in-depth review, especially if we want to keep up with the news cycle before we have a chance to sit down and look at the product in more detail.

Overview

The next level of depth is an *overview*. This may be a product that isn’t getting a lot of press, but is something that we’re interested in. Overview reviews give a reader an idea of what the product does, what the cost is, and how it compares feature-wise with other apps or hardware, but then goes into more depth of what the product actually does and how it works.

Hands On

The *hands-on* review is usually written after a blogger has had a chance to work with a product for a while. In this type of review, a blogger often talks about using the product to address a particular use case. It may not necessarily go into a lot of detail about competing products, but it’s a good way for readers to get an idea of exactly what an app or hardware can or cannot do. We often contact the developer during a hands-on review so we can better understand the product as we test it.

In Depth

The *in-depth* review is where the reviewer describes every last little detail of the product, discusses the developer’s experience and compares it with similar products, takes a huge number of photos or screenshots to demonstrate unique or different features of the product or user interface, and even offers suggestions on how the product can be improved. In-depth reviews take the most time, which is why they’re also the least likely type of review you’ll receive.

Choosing a Review Type

How do bloggers determine what kind of review to write? In many cases, it's based on previous history with the developer, the price of the product, and just how newsworthy the blogger feels that the product is. As an example, bloggers at TUAW have reviewed many different apps for reading and annotating PDF files, so most incoming PDF annotation apps get a cursory review or are just pulled into a roundup of new items. However, when one appeared that did the job faster, better, and cheaper (and for free), we jumped on it with a hands-on review.

A product that's more expensive or sophisticated in functionality is probably going to receive an in-depth review, simply because the blogger needs to put a lot of time and effort into digging into the details.

Why Blog Reviews Matter

Blog reviews mean exposure. Big blogs mean bigger exposure. It's as simple as that. Want to develop a big audience? The bigger the blog exposure, the more you benefit, especially if your product is solid and receives a good review.

How big? Here's a real-world reaction from Dave Clarke of Kashoo, telling us how a TUAW review influenced his sales:

Wanted to relay some numbers to you. In terms of iPad app downloads, the TUAW review led to our biggest day ever at 7x the average day at that time and 1.5x the previous biggest day. We had more downloads of the app in the 3 days after the review than the previous 2 weeks combined. The immediate effect was a substantial 4-day lift (almost 300% over previous 3 days; and, over previous Monday-Thursday).

BigBlueCouch received a nice boost from our in:play write-up. Here's what its creative director had to say in a follow-up email to us:

I and the rest of the team at BigBlueCouch want to give you a big thank you for your review of in:play on TUAW! We can't thank you enough. Your article kicked off a landslide and in one day we went from being non-existent in the app store to #64 overall in the United States, #4 in Music, and made it into the New and Noteworthy category. Thank you!!! Just wanted to give you an update and express our deep appreciation.

These reactions are typical. A big positive push can launch your product to a larger audience. One small developer sent us a trends chart showing a 6,400% boost in sales for a game app that was otherwise orphaned in App Store obscurity.

Victor Agreda, our editor-in-chief, has stated that TUAW frequently drives more sales and downloads of an app than an Apple feature in the App Store. TUAW and other blogs act as readers' "trusted friends." A blog site's opinions are very influential compared to banners, which customers treat as simple "billboard on the highway."

The chart in Figure 1-7 comes from developer Lyle Andrews. We featured Lyle's app Fireworks HD as our Mac App of the Day on December 27, 2011. Its "Top Paid Entertainment" rank jumped from around #100 up to a peak of #4, and stayed in the top 10 for a while.

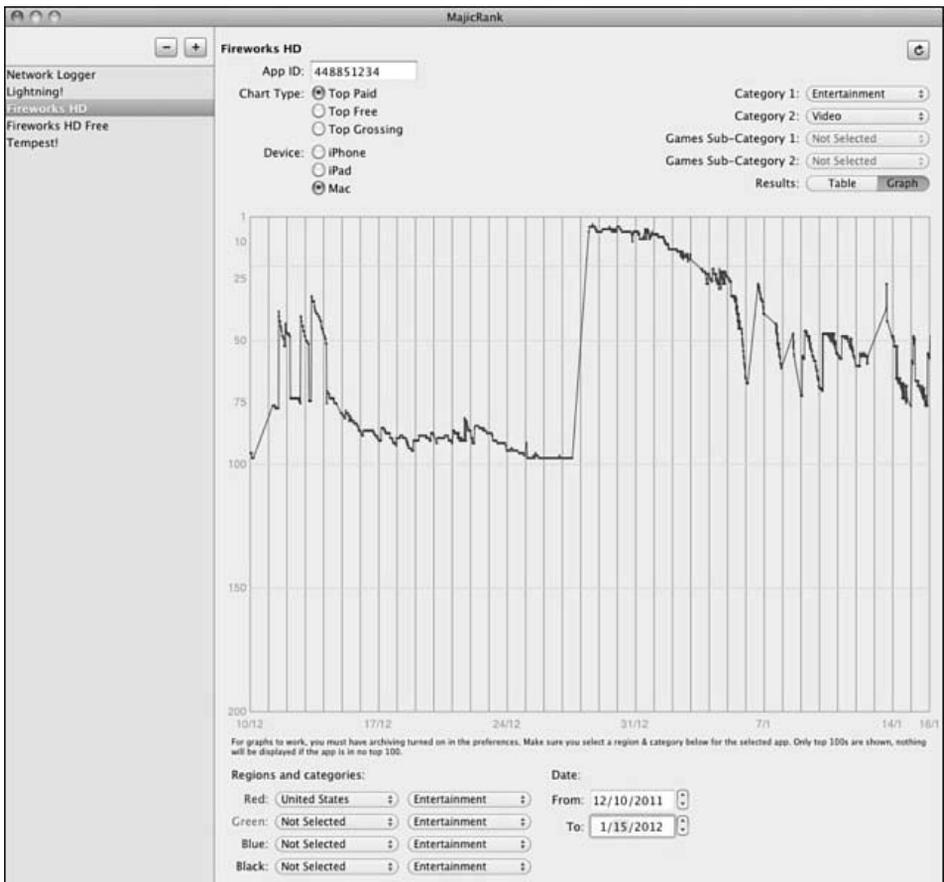


Figure 1-7

Fireworks HD market position over time.

On New Year's Eve 2012, Fireworks HD entered the "Top 10 Entertainment" charts of 13 countries. Andrews writes, "Over the next few weeks, Fireworks HD trended down as expected but happily ended in a higher average range which has persisted to date."

In other words, blog coverage *works*. It exposes your product in an unparalleled way to an audience that is specifically interested in buying these kinds of goods. The downside of this is that we're often under siege by eager devs who see us as their only hope for making their business work.

Marketing is the art of moving a product into the public eye, helping it become desirable for purchase (see Figure 1-8). Good products need word of mouth to establish an audience. Positive blog reviews help get that ball rolling and should form an important part of your marketing plan.



Figure 1-8

Blog write-ups help move products into the public eye.

At the same time, keep the following lesson in mind: It is *hard* to be an honest developer and make a go out of it, but it's not impossible. If your product is clever and noteworthy and eye- and ear-catching, it will find itself an audience. It's not easy, but good products, exciting products, always find their audience.

Marketing Realities

"Subject: promote game in appstore.

Hi, I have made very cute and interesting game for iphone. But I know that 90% of work is promotion and now I afraid to realise it. I need your advice.Thanks!!!"

—Real-world pitch request

In April 2012, marketing firm App Promo conducted a developer survey to assess success in the App Store. It found that 59% of respondents reported that they had not earned enough revenue from their most successful app to break even with development costs. What's more, 80% said that the generated revenue was not enough to sustain a standalone business.

App Promo is, of course, in the business of selling marketing services. It boasts that those developers who earned at least \$50,000 from a popular app (about 12% of respondents) spent 14% of their time doing marketing, and set aside \$30,000 just for their marketing budget. Less successful businesses (52% of respondents) spent 5% or less of their time on marketing and had no marketing budget at all.

There's no question that a large marketing budget helps promote an app, but for smaller indie devs, it's more often a question of what you can do with a limited budget. Blog reviews play an important role, as do press releases (a general PR blast can cost as little \$25, which is pretty cheap, as these things go up to \$200–\$400 for a well-defined audience; see our comments later in this book about how effective [or not] press releases may be) and small, targeted ad campaigns through Google/AdMob or email blasts. You can establish a social presence on Facebook and Twitter for the cost of your time and sweat. You can participate in one of those app giveaway sites to raise your app's exposure or use a sale to try to establish a user base to give your product buzz and momentum.

If you have the capital to hire marketing help, there's a lot that paid services can do for you. If not, you need to be persistent, clever, and dedicated to get the word out for your product. As bloggers, we can play a key role in that drive for attention, but we're not the beginning and the end of your marketing tasks.

Wrapping Up

In this chapter, you discovered how blogs work and what they can do for you. Hopefully, this information helps you decide how to fit a promotion campaign targeted at blogs and reviews into your larger marketing planning.

Here are a few final thoughts to wrap up this chapter:

- Understand what blogs need (page views) and are looking for (exciting stories) and balance this with your need for publicity. Find the exciting story that already lives within your product—and emphasize that story.

- Each kind of review may offer mixed blessings. For example, with an in-depth review, you get a lot more words written about your product. On the other hand, reviewers have a lot more time to find product flaws. Target your pitch for the style of review that best showcases your product.
- Public exposure is important for any successful app. Spend time strategizing your marketing push, not just in developing the product.

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