

# Launcher Apps: Bridging the Gap Between Native Mobile Application and Mobile Web Browser

## Executive Summary

Today's mobile landscape is dominated by the buzz on smartphones and applications. Smartphone sales are growing at a very rapid rate, and mobile devices are becoming a steadily increasing popular point of access for web content.

With these trends pointing to an inevitable dominance of the Mobile Internet, a battle has emerged between the app and the browser. With many mobile apps already accessing the web to enable some functions, several industry players have predicted that app would render the browser insignificant. On the other end of the spectrum, some web giants, notably Google, are standing by the browser as the future of the Mobile Web.

Statistics and trends support both sides. Staggering apps download numbers and rapidly ramping smartphone sales make it easy to conclude that applications will indeed be the winner in the battle for Mobile Internet dominance. On the other hand, the increasing trend of movement from device to the cloud – now happening with PCs and is fast translating to the mobile – bodes well for the browser. Even with the prevalence and perceived dominance of mobile apps, the browser and mobile sites remain relevant and an important tool for brands and companies to remain competitive in the Mobile Internet. So is there a solution, or at least a middle ground, to the great debate about the Application versus the Browser?

The Mobile Widget or Mobile Launcher App is the solution that bridges this gap. A widget is an offline application that is independent of the device and also uses the Internet, not an application store exclusively, as a distribution channel. Instead of a native application that would have different versions and submission and approval processes per smartphone operating system, companies and brands could instead opt for a mobile site that comes with a mobile app that launches the site. This gives the benefit of a presence in the apps playing field while leveraging the dynamism and cost effectiveness of a mobile site.

Ultimately, the future of the Mobile Web is a synergy between application and browser.

## Introduction

### The Current Mobile Landscape

As mobile screens became colored, got bigger, and came with higher resolutions and more sophisticated interface, the mobile phone has become more than a person-to-person communication device. People started using their mobiles to take, send and receive photos, access and consume multimedia, send and receive emails, and manage simple tasks. It has evolved into a communication, entertainment and utility device. Enter the smartphones, which wove together messaging, voice, data and the Internet – and the mobile has truly become an all-in-one device.

### The Age of the Application

With the advent of smartphones came its natural offspring – Applications. An application is defined as a software designed to allow the user to perform a singular or multiple related tasks. Application examples include games, finance management software, office suites, productivity software, and more. With Web 2.0 and social media, native applications became off-site extensions of popular user-generated websites such as blogging platforms, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, as well as valuable brands intent on heavy consumer engagement.

Applications started on the PC desktop and branched out to mobile with the rising use of the Mobile Internet. As more and more people accessed their favorite sites using their mobile phones, mobile applications for top-tier sites and brands were rapidly developed and the buzz just grew louder and louder. Website owners, marketers and mobile application developers are now competing for users' mobile screentime.

Apple's iPhone, RIM's Blackberry, and now Google's Android OS have all played a huge role in changing the mobile landscape – from the battle of the feature phones to the battle of the smartphones, mobile operating systems and mobile applications. But is it really THE big battle, considering that smartphones account for only less than 20% (*Gartner*) of the mobile phones in the world? The buzz may only be because of the strength of the brands and companies behind this battle, though it is undeniable that smartphone numbers are growing very fast.

In a one-year period, from the first quarter of 2009 to the first quarter of 2010, the number of smartphones sold already increased by 49% (Gartner). Morgan Stanley also forecasted that smartphone sales will outnumber PC sales by 2012. With these staggering numbers, the battle is no longer so much about which smartphone will leap ahead of the competition, but on what people do on their smartphones and how they access data. As voice and messaging become commodities, telcos, brands, developers and everyone else in the mobile industry turns its focus on the best way to deliver data, in terms of consumer interaction, development costs, and profitability.

The greater argument is now between Application and Web Browser.

## The Great Debate – Application vs. Browser

Apple is leading in the application turf war at the moment. Currently, there are around **263,000 active applications on the App Store, and an average of 527 apps submitted per day**. Add to that the numbers of Android, Blackberry and other application platforms and the statistics are definitely worth a close look. With the rapid growth of the number of applications being submitted to different app stores and the huge volume of downloads, it is easy to simply conclude that the Mobile Application is the Next, if not the Current, Big Thing. But is it really? It appears that mobile industry players are divided on the issue. One argument is for the “Death of the Web Browser”, while the other is “The Browser is the Future of the Mobile Web”. Two sides each with great merit and many valid points.

### “Death of the Web Browser”

*“Ladies and gentlemen, a moment of silence please. It is time for us to start preparing for a death: the death of the web browser.”*

– Adam Richardson (author of Innovation X and Creative Director at Frog Design), in an [article](#) on [thenextweb.com](#)

It is a hyperbole, but the article presented logical indicators pointing to the decline in relevance of the mobile browser as more web content are embedded into applications, widgets, and objects such as mobile devices, cars, and even clothing. What matters now is what people get out of the web, whether it is through a browser, an application, or any other channel. In this era of “Content is King”, the browser appears to steadily lose its significance as content continues to be distributed through multiple streams.

*“As web access gets embedded into more and more physical objects – whether they be handheld products, kitchen appliances, retail environments, or car dashboards – the browser becomes an interstitial interference rather an enabler. The object itself takes over the presentation and control, whether with physical, touch, gesture, voice or some other type of control method.”*

The focus is shifting to the device as the conduit for web content, and no longer the browser. It is the object over the browser.

## **“The Browser is the Future of the Mobile Web”**

*“What we clearly see happening is a move to incredibly powerful browsers. Many, many applications can be delivered through the browser and what that does for our costs is stunning. We believe the web has won and over the next several years, the browser, for economic reasons almost, will become the platform that matters and certainly that's where Google is investing.”*

- Vic Gundotra, Google Vice President for Engineering

This opposite argument is championed by a web giant – Google. And it is an obvious position to take, the company being in the business of browser-based services. However, there are rational and objective points raised by Google and other proponents of this forecast.

Several factors that make the browser a more viable long-term method of web content delivery include:

- The many different app platforms and many different phone units, as against a standardized browser platform
- Native Applications are much more costly than a browser
- HTML 5 will revolutionize the browser, able to tap features of certain phones, such as the accelerometer, allowing mobile sites to mimic application features
- The question of data portability and flexibility in an application. Data is trapped in the device.
- App store approval can be a tedious process
- Sometimes unnecessary or irrelevant competition, due to sheer volume of applications submitted and approved

Just like what happened with PCs and the desktop, the mobile is headed from the device to the cloud as well.

## Bridging the Gap

Given the two strong and vastly polar sides on the direction and future of the mobile web, is there a logical, viable middle point or a way to connect the two sides without discarding their merits and taking advantage of the most valid points? There is – the widget or LAUNCHER APP that opens a mobile site, instead of a native application that resides on the mobile device.

### What is a widget?

A widget is a small stand-alone application that can be installed on a device or embedded on a site (webpage, blog, social media profile, for example). It allows users to instantly access web and mobile applications or sites. Some of more popular uses of widgets are for clocks, calendars, weather, time zone, flight status, and other important real-time information.

There are two kinds of widgets – the web widget and the desktop or mobile widget. Web widgets are embedded onto sites, such as the Twitter updates, Flickr streams, blog feeds, or any other small boxes of interactive information often seen on sidebars of websites, blogs and social media profiles. Desktop and mobile widgets, on the other hand, are those installed on PCs and mobile phones and are not necessarily dependent on web connection.

## The Mobile Launcher App

The mobile launcher app is the solution to the vicious circle of the Application vs. Browser battle. Instead of a native mobile app, companies, brands, website owners, and developers could opt for a **mobile app that launches their mobile site**. The mobile site can then give users a richer experience, with access to more updated content and functions.



In contrast to a native application, a mobile launcher app can be distributed not only through a single platform through an exclusive application store. It could be distributed through websites, blogs, social media, email, file hosting sites, and more – practically any channel that best suits the owner or developer's objectives.

## Benefits of the Mobile Launcher App

- Quick way to access relevant information
- Good for brand awareness and online PR
- Enhances user experience
- Excellent marketing tool
- Adds value to website visitors

## The Mobile Site – Still very much relevant in spite of native mobile apps

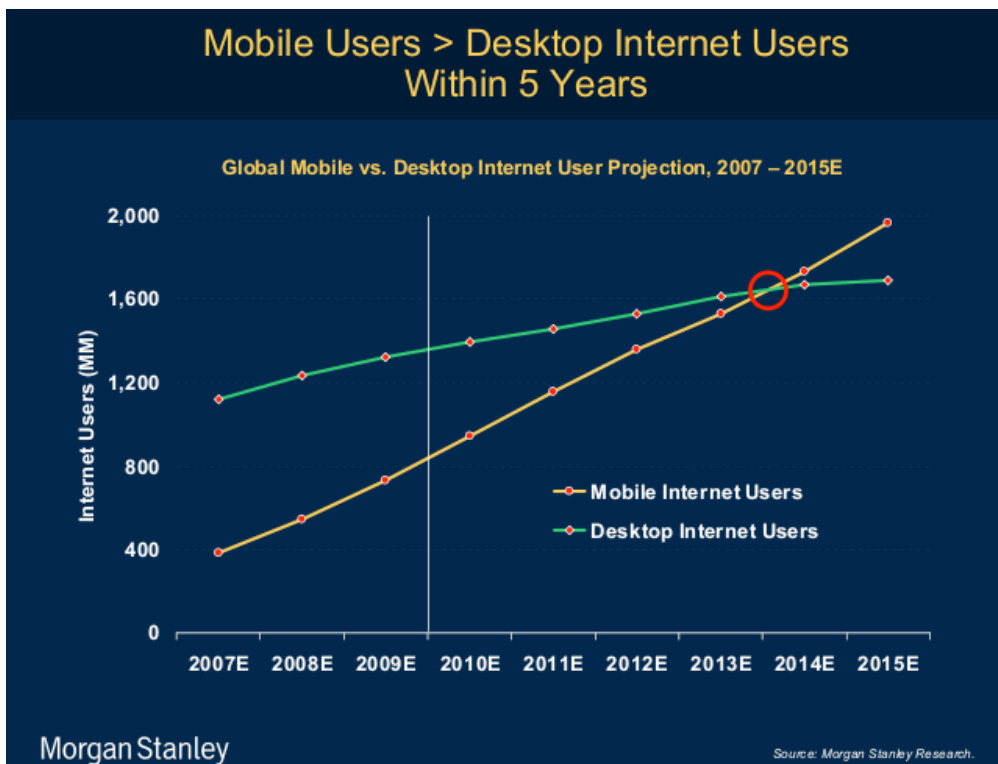
Games have always been the most downloaded apps, followed by books, utilities, and social media. However, the download numbers must not be taken at face value. Although games are the most downloaded, **the most USED are the social media and utility applications**. Users download games for the entertainment value and due to a good measure of curiosity, but often use them only for several times. In contrast, users stick to the social media and utility applications that they like. And in spite of the huge number of applications available from app stores, consider the following:

<b>AVERAGE NUMBER OF APPS USERS HAVE ON THEIR PHONES</b>				
<b>iPhone</b>	<b>Android</b>	<b>Palm</b>	<b>Windows</b>	<b>Blackberry</b>
37	22	14	13	10

Marketers and developers need to find the key for their apps to be part of that average. Companies and brands keen on mobile marketing must think and strategize carefully before treading on mobile apps ground. Instead of jumping into the bandwagon, brand strategists and marketers must first consider the urgency of need, relevance, cost implications, and returns of a native app versus a mobile app that launches their mobile site. Any app must be of high value to the user for it to be retained and used regularly.

A brand would do better to have a dynamic mobile site that could be updated as often as needed and could be flexible in terms of tools, features, and functions. A native app is limited to what it was originally programmed for. Any update or tweak means relaunching a new version and repeating the submission and approval process before it can be properly distributed to users.

Mobile Internet has been forecasted to outpace desktop Internet access as soon as 2013 by Gartner, and in 5 years by Morgan Stanley. Given this and a host of other similar forecasts, the shift to mobile is inevitable – the differences are only as to **when** it will happen.



Companies and brands therefore have to be prepared for this and must take steps to stay competitive online. A mobile site will soon become as critical and as ubiquitous as the website is today.

*“Websites not optimized for the smaller-screen formats will become a market barrier for their owners. Much content and many sites will need to be reformatted/rebuilt”*

– Gartner

Mobile apps will also be just as critical in the dominance of the Mobile Internet. However, not every company or website owner will have the resources to come out with a native application

This is where the mobile launcher app comes in. Instead of having a native app, brands could have a mobile app that launches their mobile site, which they can build to function as an application. It allows brands to still have a presence in the all-important apps market, while the mobile site delivers better than an app and is a more dynamic and permanent force in the Mobile Internet.

This hybridization of app and mobile site is now easier with the rise of websites that offer mobile site creation services that also include mobile widgets or mobile launcher apps in the package. Given the statistics on app usage, it would be more cost-effective for companies to have mobile sites with launcher apps in the long run.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the answer to the great debate of App versus Browser is a fusion of the two. User experience will be greatly enhanced by making the app and the browser work together to deliver mobile content in the best possible way. Both app and browser will continue to develop and evolve, but neither should cannibalize the other.

The Mobile Widget or Mobile App that launches a mobile site is the solution to bridge the gap between the seemingly opposing characteristics of the app and the browser. Native apps are best used for games, entertainment, social media and utilities, but companies and brands would benefit more with a mobile launcher app for their mobile site. Both apps and browser would come out as winners, and phone companies, application platforms, brands and developers all benefit from this synergy.



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info@mobilemo.com  
[www.mobilemo.com](http://www.mobilemo.com)