

# Downtown Promotion Reporter

The tools you need to bring more people and business downtown



## Technology

### Smartphone app keeps people coming back

Mobile websites are all the rage now, as ever more people stay connected to the Internet and each other through their smartphones. Many people plan the events of their daily lives with these nifty gadgets, which actually integrate communication and information even better than traditional computers.

Mobile websites can usually determine when they're being accessed by a mobile device, and scale things to the smaller screen accordingly. That's certainly handy for downtowns trying to be accessible to people who are already in the vicinity.

An even more specialized approach that some downtowns may wish to take is developing an application or "app," which works natively on the most popular smartphones. With an app, information can be downloaded and stored locally on the device. So news about events and the like can be read even if Internet service is spotty and drops out.

A good precedent for what the downtown mobile app can look like has been set by mobile app developer Geoffiti, which has developed an app for its own downtown Long Beach, CA (est. pop. 462,600), commissioned by the Downtown Long Beach Associates.

**Wishlist of features: Promote businesses without bias, engage residents, and inform visitors.** "It started out with a wishlist [from the DLBA]. We took that information and tried to read between the lines and

figure out what the underlying logic behind it was. The thing that fundamentally stood out was that they needed to create an agnostic tool to be able to promote the businesses, engage the residents, and inform people who are going to be visiting," says Ali Reza Kohani, the CEO of Geoffiti.

Most of the other services or tools that were already in play, he says, were focused on specific kinds of downtown users seeking specific kinds of businesses, e.g., a visitor seeking a good Chinese restaurant nearby.

What's more, travel and dining tool apps, like Yelp, for the most part, also feature user ratings, reviews, and recommendations, which aren't always fair to the businesses being rated.

There was no comprehensive app that could serve as a resource for the entire downtown, including all of its businesses,

events, and parking, and all of its users — visitors as well as residents and even business owners seeking a better way to market. "Here, the downtown businesses are all being promoted equally. So there's no feeling that any one business is being promoted over any other," Kohani says.

"This is a really great way for people that are residents and visitors to be able to get local information in an easy to understand way, without all the layers of editorial comments that are typically present, or having one business be listed on top because they paid more," he says.



Screenshot of the Downtown Long Beach app for the iPhone.

[www.DowntownDevelopment.com](http://www.DowntownDevelopment.com)

Reprinted from the November 2010 issue of *Downtown Promotion Reporter*  
© 2010 Alexander Communications Group, Inc. All rights reserved.  
DO NOT EDIT OR ALTER REPRINTS • REPRODUCTION NOT PERMITTED

New features such as push notifications — which can alert users with critical news about things like street closures even when an app is not running — will be added over time in software updates.

Initially developed for the iPhone, the Downtown Long Beach app is also available for Android smartphones, and a BlackBerry version is in the works.

**Integrating location-based information in new and useful ways.** One new feature in the works is enabling the app to share special offers that the downtown businesses currently have available.

“That makes this an easy and simple way for them to be able to have a mobile presence as part of their marketing strategy,” Kohani says.

“It’s really about understanding, what are the types of features that are going to be most used? For instance in downtown Long Beach, we found out that one of the most used [app] modules is the ‘Events’ portion. So having event information integrated with nearby parking would be a way to make their particular application more useful.”

Parking information is already very well-integrated with business listings in downtown Long Beach. If you click on the “Guide,” and then, say, “Restaurants,” all are listed in alphabetical order. Click on a particular restaurant, and the options include get directions, place a call, visit the business website, search for nearby parking, or share the business listing with friends via email.

Once you search for nearby parking, you are presented with a map showing the business location. You can then zoom out to as far as a mile radius, and back in by tenths of a mile, to find parking garages and lots within a sensible walking distance.

Tap on a parking ‘P,’ and you are given the operation’s name, street address, phone number, number of spaces, rates, hours, and a link to share with friends.

Wherever you do end up parking, the app also allows you to very conveniently mark and remember that spot through GPS.

It’s not surprising that the event portion of the Downtown Long Beach app is the most popular. It’s an excellent way for people to find something to do on a free night, and make a date.

Events are listed in chronological order, with links to the DLBA website for more details, to view or print a map, or share the event on Facebook. Again, there

## Design from the perspective of the user, and never stop refining

The Downtown Long Beach iPhone app recently earned a marketing award from the California Downtown Association. What made it a success?

“What has made this app such a success is that it was designed from the perspective of the user. Rather than creating an app based on the content, we were able to work with the developer, Geoffiti, to customize the information based on how residents and visitors use our downtown. As a result, the app is extremely intuitive and easy to navigate,” says Steve Sheldon, the marketing and special events manager for Downtown Long Beach Associates.

“I think the key lesson has been that it’s never finished,” he adds. “The more people use our app, the more great suggestions we get for how to add or improve certain features. And with technology advancing at such a fast pace, there will always be another widget to add or design element to enhance.”

Contact: Steve Sheldon, Downtown Long Beach Associates, (562) 436-4259, [steves@dlba.org](mailto:steves@dlba.org).

are links underneath each event to email friends about it, or add it to your device’s calendar.

Future updates to the app could even allow friends to more easily find each other using “augmented reality,” once they’re both at, say, a large, crowded festival.

Another important feature built into the app is that the downtown organization is able to easily update the information it presents in-house.

“The application has an administration module that allows the downtown to be able to manage their own content,” Kohani says.

A single content management system keeps the downtown website and mobile apps up-to-date and in sync on all platforms.

**Using technology to enhance connections with downtown users.** A smartphone app can be an excellent virtual gateway for people coming downtown. “We believe that same information that’s on downtown websites is more useful and valuable if it’s available on the street, in people’s smartphones,” says Travis Brooks, Geoffiti’s vice president of sales.

While many downtowns will be fine having just a cross-platform capable Web app, others may see greater value and benefit in producing apps that are customized for people's particular mobile devices.

"The difference is the depth of functionality, and the ability to be more connected to the client," through providing coupons and communications directly to the app's user, Brooks says.

"We believe it enhances that connection, and we can do more with it than a mobile website. ... It's really different. It's not miniaturization. It's a mobilization of that data, and it makes it micro-local. ... The website miniaturized for a mobile interface is not able to do all that in a clean and functional manner. What we're looking to do is provide a level of power and connectedness to the information that people need that's just not available any other way."

An app that someone chose to download and

install on his or her mobile device also enjoys greater visibility and heightened awareness by that end user, Kohani adds. Whether they live in the area or are just visiting, app users are reminded each time they see its icon on their device or computer that this is a tool for them to use, to make their experiences of downtown easier, more productive, and more enjoyable.

If your organization is looking at commissioning an app, first consider the type of reach you want it to have, and which platform(s) you want the app to run on, Kohani advises.

Once you select a developer, "work with them to figure out, what are the things that lead your community to require a mobile application?" he says. That might be different from one downtown to the next.

Contact: Travis Brooks, Geoffiti, (646) 543.8436, [travis@geoffiti.com](mailto:travis@geoffiti.com). **DPR**

**Downtown Promotion Reporter**<sup>®</sup> a publication of the Downtown Research & Development Center

712 Main Street — Suite 187B, Boonton, NJ 07005

Phone: (973) 265-2300 • Fax: (973) 402-6056 • Email: [info@DowntownDevelopment.com](mailto:info@DowntownDevelopment.com) • Website: [www.DowntownDevelopment.com](http://www.DowntownDevelopment.com)

*Downtown Promotion Reporter*<sup>®</sup> is published monthly by the Downtown Research & Development Center. The Center provides news, information and analysis for successful downtown revitalization through its newsletters, books, reports, and website.

© 2010 Alexander Communications Group, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Alexander Communications Group.