

Mobile App Descriptions: Observations and Tips

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most dynamic aspects of the smartphone revolution has been the introduction of mobile apps that are downloaded for use in smartphones and tablets. The Apple App and Google Play Stores are the primary players and have been since their establishment nearly 12 years ago. Phone manufacturers who attempted to create their own native app ecosystems, such as BlackBerry, generally failed. Of course, many know that BlackBerry phones now have the Android OS, which means access to the Google Play Store.

With the long - overdue focus on privacy - 20 years late in the estimation of the author - mobile apps are under increasing scrutiny. This is particularly true where apps may be directed towards children - and collecting their personal data in the process. I have been fortunate to have reviewed over 10,400 apps in the Apple App and Google Play Stores, and have some observations and tips to share with you. These observations and tips are exactly that - they are not legal advice. Thus, you are recommended to seek legal advice from your general counsel or outside attorney.

OBSERVATIONS AND TIPS

1. I have seen sloppily written app descriptions - complete with spelling and grammatical errors. Thus, apps should be precisely written and explicitly clear as to what the app(s) is / are designed for, what age rating is appropriate, and what audience(s) the app(s) is / are directed towards. The app store content ratings should be accurate to the directed age groups and content descriptions. This is especially true for children as well as for mature subject matter and topics involving violence, crude humor, blood / gore / death, stronger sexual themes and content, and partial nudity. If an app is part of the Google Play Store "Designed for Families" (DFF) ratings, then it should be marked as such on the app page.
2. Make sure there is consistent alignment between the descriptive words and pictures / media / images / screenshots in the app description. This is especially true when it comes to the ages of "directed persons" / target audience and where the content involves mature or potentially controversial subject matter. If an app is directed towards children (under age 13) and older individuals (a "mixed" app), then the descriptions should clearly state that. It is critical that app descriptions for children be crystal clear.
3. There is a fine line between too much and too little information on the app page. Some apps have too much extraneous information and not enough important detail. App descriptions are truly art + science.

4. It is also important to recognize that there are differences globally with the use of child-specific images. In some regions / cultures, that use may be perfectly appropriate for older audiences (not directed at children) while in other regions and cultures those images are not used except in apps directed towards children. Be aware of this global dimension.
5. Be clear about the financial dimensions of apps (as applicable). Will they require purchases once the app is downloaded? If so, what is the cost and how often? Is there is a subscription option? Consumers do not want to be surprised by these costs. Reading the reviews of apps in these stores illustrates the "surprise" of these additional costs. It is quite informative to read the reviews of apps in both stores.
6. If ads will pop up while an app is used, alert the consumer to this fact. This is another area where consumers would rather not be surprised.
7. Ensure that your company privacy policy and other associated terms and conditions / terms of service are current and in compliance with the requisite statutes and regulations (such as the EU GDPR, U.S. COPPA, and the State of California CCPA).

SUMMARY

App descriptions in the Apple App and Google Play Stores serve two important purposes - to entice people to download / use that app and comply with the relevant country / jurisdiction statutes and regulations. Apps require the same concise writing and dedication to detail that many other areas of technology and law require. From what I have seen in reviewing app pages, the biggest issues are sloppy writing (including missing substance) and inconsistent messages in them (especially between words and images / media). It is better to identify child - directed apps in the app page rather than have a governmental authority begin to question / analyze apps to ensure that the privacy interests of children are being protected.

We are entering a heightened age where the protection of personal data is much more important than previously desired or expected. It is better to adopt privacy - protecting practices now than react to legislation / regulation later.

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