EXPLORING THE TABLET BANKING LANDSCAPE

Best treat them as more than big smartphones

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Many consider the iPad and similar tablets to be the future of mobile, if not the future of computing. Whether you believe the hype, the popularity of these devices is hard to dispute. Apple is expected to sell its 100 millionth iPad this year. Android-based alternatives like the Kindle Fire are finally beginning to gain traction in the marketplace, and even Microsoft has broken character announcing its own rival device, the Surface.

Since the iPad’s launch two years ago, many financial services firms have introduced tablet-formatted apps that take advantage of the tablet’s greater screen size and computing power. Corporate Insight’s latest Mobile Monitor Report, published in May, reviewed the tablet apps offered by 13 financial services firms, including six banks and credit card issuers. Later that month, U.S. Bank released its own tablet app, bringing the number of banks and card issuers tracked by Corporate Insight offering tablet apps to seven.

Below, we provide some highlights from our recent iPad and tablet research:

Banks look beyond the iPad

With the iPad by far the most popular tablet among consumers, it's no surprise that it's been the focus of development for financial services firms. All six of the bank and card firms covered in our report, as well as U.S. Bank, offer apps for the iPad.

When the iPad first hit the market, the first firms to embrace its new potential were brokerages like E*TRADE. Interestingly, though, bank and card firms have led experimentation with newer Android-powered tablets. American Express and Bank of America support a variety of Android tablets, while Citi offers a tablet app optimized for the Kindle Fire. There are other firms that have apps in Amazon's App Store, but Citi is the only one to treat the device as a tablet rather than a somewhat larger handheld device.

Designing for the tablet

For the most part, companies maintain the level of service and make the most changes in design, not capabilities, when moving to a tablet. For instance, firms such as American Express and Bank of America provide a much more spacious accounts overview on the larger tablet screen. Design is generally consistent across tablet apps, i.e., for firms that offer both an iPad and Android tablet app.

One of the keys to demonstrating true leadership in the tablet space (and scoring high marks in our reports), though, is to offer a tablet app that improves upon what is already available on a smartphone.

Bank of America and Citi do a good job presenting new account visualizations that take advantage of the tablets' larger screens. On both the iPad and Kindle Fire, Citi offers graphical views of total credits/debits, recent transactions, and outlays by payee. Their tablet apps also contain educational content, including interactive spending category graphics. On Bank of America's tablet apps, clients can view a tile view of account balances as well as a calendar with upcoming transactions.

Tablet banking is here to stay

Tablets are gaining immense popularity among consumers, and banks have begun to notice and respond. This presents a new challenge for firms that have already invested in account management platforms online and on handheld devices.

However, clients increasingly expect apps tailored for the devices they use most, and banks have an opportunity to demonstrate technological leadership on the iPad and similar devices.