What Digital Health & Fitness Tech Can Learn from the iPhone

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I used to be bullish on digital health and fitness products designed for consumers. I was armed with compelling statistics and bold projections of how this sector was going to "cross the chasm" and explode in sales to the mainstream market. I helped clients develop strategies to enter the burgeoning market and I spoke at conferences evangelizing the potential impact on people's health and lifestyles.

But it wasn't long before I started to realize that I was having the same conversations and writing and reading the same articles over and over again. I had to face the fact that no one had cracked the code on engaging the mainstream consumer with digital health and fitness products — and sustaining that engagement. Sure, Nike, its Nike+ device, and NikeFuel community now has more than 30 million members, and Fitbit sold approximately one million Fitbit Force units in the products' first four months on the market. But these numbers pale in comparison to other consumer technologies. Seven years ago, it took Apple only 74 days to sell its first 1 million iPhones and only 28 days to sell as many iPads.

The adoption rate of the first iPhone was particularly impressive because it seemed to have broken through at a rate unlike anything we had ever seen up until that time with a consumer digital device (in comparison, two other popular

devices, the Blackberry and the iPod, took nearly 1 year each to reach 1 million units sold .) And with stats that show the average mobile phone user checks their device 150+ times a day , there's no question that the iPhone has continued to keep its owners engaged.

With such stark contrasts in market sales and 'stickiness' of use, I decided to investigate the factors behind the iPhone's success. What I discovered are some characteristics of that device that seem particularly instructive for consumer digital health and fitness technology developers:

Common Usage
When the iPhone launched, its core functionality was communication by phone — something practically everyone needed to do multiple times a day. As such, we needed our phones with us pretty much all the time. I believe it is this common needs-driven usage that was the number one driver behind mainstream adoption of the iPhone (and all the smartphones that have come after it.)

Unfortunately, health and fitness remains a far more discretionary activity for most people. And a digital device is not required for starting exercise, nor for continuing it — not the way using a phone is required to communicate with people by voice or text. Digital health and fitness technology will take over the mainstream if it's tied to a common everyday activity and if it's needed, not only wanted. It must be more of a necessity than a complement to our lives.

That's why it's more likely that digital-tech based solutions focused on food and eating are more likely to become mainstream than activity-oriented products. Everyone has to eat every day, after all. Moreover, mainstream adoption is more likely to occur if consumers are incentivized or penalized by health insurers or employers. Financial implications have proven to be significant motivators in these cases. In the absence of these scenarios, we can't keep hoping for a groundswell of health and fitness interest desire to arise, nor can we expect gamification and social community – compelling as they are — to have widespread influence and compel people to purchase or use these solutions on their own. We must create and identify common needs that we uniquely meet.

Integration
Remember when we used to carry around a cellphone, a PDA, an iPod, and a laptop? Some of us even carried around a digital camera too. The iPhone combined the functionality of all these devices into a single gadget. My purse lost three pounds over night!

Today I can perform most of my desired health and fitness functions with my phone and the apps I've downloaded onto it, but if I want the functionality and precision of, say, my Garmin Forerunner or my Timex watch, or the pedometer and calorie counting function of my Fitbit, I'm back to using multiple devices. Plus my phone isn't waterproof (a limitation for people who do water sports or sweat as much as I do) and it's big (and likely to get bigger if I upgrade), so I sometimes leave it at home and I'm stuck with using multiple devices instead.

The reason why no digital health and fitness device has broken through the ceiling of more than a few million users is that they all have been developed as discrete, single-purpose gadgets that areincremental to products people already own. Digital health and fitness device makers must prioritize integrating the separate products, functions, behaviors, and features.

Intuitive User Interface
Many aspects of the iPhone design have been extolled as reasons why people love the product, but I suspect but the touchscreen interface is probably the one most responsible for people adopting the product so quickly and continuing to use it regularly. It is intuitive and natural – it requires no learning curve, as evidenced by the many toddlers who use the devices. The user interface of any health and fitness technology needs to be as intuitive. It should take into account people's natural behaviors and motions. And we need to remember that what is intuitive to a fitness enthusiast or a health nut may be completely foreign to the average person.

Personalized Experience
Although the device itself was revolutionary, the ultimate value – and therefore the regular and continued usage — of

the iPhone is actually derived from the apps and Internet access people use it for. With the app explosion, people now have virtually unlimited and individually-curated functionality. No longer are people's experiences with a device mediated or limited by its creators. By opening up app development and creating the app store, Apple put the device experience in the hands of the people who actually experience it. Apps give choice and control. Choice and control lead to a more personal experience. And that in turns leads to sustained usage.

We must introduce the same level of choice and control in digital health and fitness technologies so that people create experiences that they want to participate in over and over again. In our efforts to educate people or to make things simple and easy, I fear we sometimes make our innovations too prescriptive. We need to open the door to possible uses and let the needs of the market drive innovation. Let's keep our focus on launching flexible tools instead of defined solutions. After all, many of the problems we're solving are ones people don't even know they have

Ecosystem
So far I've been making observations about the iPhone that may seem to suggest a device-centric explanation of its success. But I believe the real driver was the technology ecosystem of hardware manufacturers, software developers, carriers, distributors, and content producers that Apple assembled and unleashed. The integration of all the parties coming together created not only a seamless customer experience but also boundless platform for innovation.

There's a lot of talk about health and fitness ecosystems, but too many digital health and fitness companies are still developing their own devices or their own software and apps. Sure, they might integrate into the Facebook API or sync to other devices, but they're not developing integrated platforms as sources of innovation. Instead of seeking out partners that might enhance features, we need to be engaging with co-developers — from healthcare providers, to equipment manufacturers, fitness facilities, restaurants and grocery stores, insurance companies, apparel and sporting goods brands — to create entirely new experiences together. The health and fitness technologies that build the right ecosystems are the ones that will spark cultural movements.

Back in 2007, I don't think anyone – perhaps not even Steve Jobs himself – could have over-estimated how revolutionary the iPhone was. But we now have the benefit of seeing what an enormous impact it has had on how we communicate, how we use content, and really, how we live. The characteristics that drove the iPhone's success suggest the requirements we must meet if we hope to change people's lives the way we believe digital health and fitness can. I hope we're up to the challenge – and I hope the recent strong interest and major pushes into the segment on the part of powerful consumer brands like Apple, Samsung, and Google are a sign that we are. I want to be bullish on digital health and fitness again.

Image Source: Nickolay Lamm