App Store Optimization — What Is It?

In 2016, total time spent in apps reached nearly 900 billion hours worldwide. On average, this translates into two hours per day, or one month out of a year. That means there’s an unprecedented opportunity for marketers to connect with their customers no matter where they are. However, successfully leveraging this enormous opportunity relies on finding the right users and ensuring that they download your app.

App Store Optimization (ASO) is the process of increasing your app’s visibility in the app stores so that it is in the top search results; it’s like the mobile app version of search engine optimization (SEO). With more than 65% of app downloads coming from organic searches in an app store, ASO is the foundation every marketer needs in order to acquire valuable new users.

A sound ASO strategy depends on two core components: discoverability and conversion. Targeted keywords help place your app in the top of search queries (discoverability), and strategic app store assets like your icon, description and screenshots improve the chances that prospective users will download your app (conversion).

In this guide, we will share best practices for improving app discoverability and downloads among quality users and offer actionable advice you can apply to your own ASO efforts.
Improving Discoverability

There are many ways a user can find your app; search is one. While most resources emphasize a keyword strategy for ASO, it’s better to think of keywords as one tool in your arsenal to boost your app’s visibility. Paired with good categorization of your app and dedication to improving ratings and reviews, the right keywords can dramatically improve your ASO.

Choosing Keywords

With millions of apps available in the app stores, choosing keywords that will move the needle for your business is no easy feat. Your keyword strategy should neither exist in a vacuum nor be static — it must be fluid and continuous, taking into account competitive and cultural changes within the app ecosystem, plus the impact on your app’s ranking, downloads and revenue. So how can you select the right keywords to start with? Let’s dive into the most effective methodologies.

Pay Attention to Competitors
Finding the best keywords means closely tracking and monitoring your competitors. By analyzing how a competitor ranks for a specific keyword, or determining which other apps rank for your app’s keywords, you can strategically select keywords to help your app rank higher.

Leverage User Reviews
One of the best ways to describe your app is to use language from user reviews — their words may resonate better with prospective users than the ones you had in mind.

Stay on Top of Your Ranking
Once you’ve selected a group of keywords, it’s important to keep an eye on how these keywords impact your ranking.
APP ANNIE INTELLIGENCE: Keyword Analysis

Using App Annie Intelligence, you can create customized peer groups and compare across a number of keyword metrics including ranking, traffic share, search volume and difficulty. Keeping track across these metrics allows you to easily identify changes in an apps’ ASO strategy including the example above for HotelTonight which has been quickly gaining traffic share for “Hotels.” This information allows you to easily identify areas of opportunity for adjustments to be made within your strategy so you don’t miss out on being at the top of search results.
Categorizing Your App

There are two ways app stores rank apps: by category and overall. Every app publisher is responsible for choosing how to categorize its own apps; with each app, it’s important to choose categories that are highly relevant but also give you competitive advantage.

Before selecting categories for your app, you should first research what your closest competitors are doing. This will help you determine the competition in that category and show how users are searching for similar apps. Choosing a less competitive category could improve discoverability for your app.

In the iOS App Store, you can choose a primary and a secondary category; games have three categories. The primary is most important as it determines where your app will be displayed in search results and the top charts. However, your app will be listed under both categories in the Explore tab.

So how should you choose your primary category? Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Where you believe your app naturally fits
- How target users will search for your app
- How competitors or similar apps categorize themselves

To improve discoverability, some publishers recategorize their apps to move into less cluttered territory. For instance, in April 2016 Twitter was recategorized from Social to News, a strategy that effectively moved it back to a top-ranked position.

In the Google Play store, publishers can choose only one category for their app, so it is even more critical to choose carefully. In both stores, it’s a balance: you need to select categories that are relevant but not overly saturated.
The Influence of Ratings & Reviews

You probably know that positive ratings and reviews affect your app’s performance in the app stores, but did you know you have more control over them than you think? Optimizing for higher ratings and reviews can improve your app’s ranking as well as the amount of organic traffic it receives.

Encourage Optimal Ratings & Reviews

An app’s debut rarely goes off without a hitch. There may be persistent bugs, performance issues on different devices, or features that don’t yet exist but users would like to see. This can lead to some very low ratings and reviews in the beginning. If your launch generates negative reviews, don’t get discouraged — even unfavorable reviews may be full of information on how to update and improve your app. As long as you take user feedback seriously, changing public opinion can go smoothly.

Here’s a great example. The Social dining app Down to Lunch launched in May 2015 and attained viral growth across the US in Spring 2016, but a few components within the app received negative feedback from users. For example, during initial account setup, it wasn’t immediately clear that users could invite their entire contact list to download the app. When the team addressed this concern, Down to Lunch’s rating started to climb to a 4.0 while growing its ranking in the competitive Social Networking category on iOS.
Responding to users on Google Play is one of our favorite ways to improve store ratings. With one-to-one customer service, we typically find that the underlying reason for the 1-star and 2-star reviews, resolve it with the user, and ask them to revise their rating. The result is a higher rating, and more importantly, an active and happy user.

Alex Mackenzie-Torres
CMO, Moovit

Diligently Improve Ratings & Reviews

Turning negative ratings and reviews into positive ones takes time and consistent action. The faster you respond to user feedback and update your app, the happier users will be, and over time, additional positive reviews will result in better rankings and more downloads. Knowing just how and when to gain ratings and reviews is also important: Key interactions, such as just after a user has made a purchase or completed a level, are a great time to solicit ratings that will be 4- and 5-star. With iOS and Google Play, publishers can respond to reviews directly within the developer platform, so it’s never been easier to interact with customers and take immediate action with both positive and negative reviews.
Measuring Success: Why ASO is a Living Process

ASO is an ongoing process, something that requires nurturing, attention, and as always in the world of apps, optimization. This means:

- Monitoring your keyword rankings (and those of your competitors)
- Selecting appropriate categories
- Analyzing reviews and rankings and leveraging feedback

A holistic and iterative ASO program will not only improve organic discoverability, it will also increase your chances of convincing users to download your app.

Want to Learn More?

In the next guide, Building Your App Store Presence, we’ll dive into best practices in optimizing your app store assets for conversion.

ABOUT APP ANNIE

App Annie delivers the most trusted app data and insights for your business to succeed in the global app economy. Over 1 million registered members rely on App Annie to better understand the app market, their businesses and the opportunities around them. The company is headquartered in San Francisco with 15 global offices. App Annie has received $157 million in financing from investors such as e.ventures, Greenspring Associates, Greycroft Partners, IDG Capital Partners, Institutional Venture Partners and Sequoia Capital.

GET STARTED FOR FREE TODAY