



Apple Preps iPhone SDK Release: Users Hope For Brawnier Business Apps

As Apple prepares to deliver its anticipated software development kit (SDK) this week, we look at the list of business applications and improvements that enterprise users still need the most.

By Al Sacco

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[iPhone](#) users have been anxiously awaiting the debut of a software development kit (SDK) for the uber smartphone since last fall when Apple CEO Steve Jobs first [confirmed rumors of a planned February 2008 SDK release](#). The kit, which will enable external developers to build third-party applications that can run indigenously on the iPhone, is expected to greatly expand the powerful device's potential as a business tool plus quell some enterprise IT concerns.

[Apple](#) will hold an invitation-only event at its Cupertino, Calif., campus this week at which it's expected to release the SDK

One burning question: How much freedom will developers have? Some sources say the company [plans to institute a strict approval process](#) over any and all external iPhone applications. Others suggest only applications with price tags will require Apple's sanction and [free applications will see a far less stringent approval process](#), if any. Such processes could make it difficult for vendors of iPhone apps to sell their wares, as Apple would then have a hand in what functionality they can offer. And it's likely that all third-party software will be sold through its iTunes store.

Regardless, the release of the iPhone SDK will represent a significant step toward the iPhone becoming a viable business device, says Forrester Analyst Chris Silva.

"This is Apple finally, though with some reservations, opening up its platform to vendors that make business-specific applications," [Silva](#) says.

Which applications, or enhancements to existing applications, are business users most eager to see? Here's our take on the top four iPhone application wishes:

1) Robust E-Mail Client With "Push" Mail Functionality

One of the biggest complaints from corporate iPhone users is that the device doesn't currently support "push" mail (mail that is delivered instantly as it lands in inboxes instead of being fetched by the mail client at set intervals.) [BlackBerry](#)-maker Research In Motion set the bar high with its tried-and-true push offering, and Apple will have to meet that challenge if it hopes to provide the level of service business users want and need, says [Frank Mahdavi](#), Chief Strategy Officer of MIR3. MIR3 currently offers an intelligent notification application for the iPhone and the iPod touch, and Mahdavi is himself an iPhone user. Mahdavi says he expects that some of the first applications developed using the new SDK will be enhanced mail clients with push e-mail.

Bill Hughes, Principal Analysts with In-Stat, agrees that push email is important but warns that offering reliable push e-mail isn't as easy as RIM sometimes makes it seem. Hughes doesn't think iPhone users will see a quality third-party mail client with push functionality for at least another year.

2) Enterprise Security Enhancements

The lack of necessary security safeguards continues to vex IT departments considering supporting iPhones. For instance, IT cannot currently wipe or lock lost or stolen devices, and support representatives don't have the ability to control the data that users download or upload to and from the device. Nor can they remotely enforce password changes.

"IT departments need the ability to remotely wipe devices and enforce password change policy," in their corporate smartphones, says Gartner analyst Ken Dulaney. Dulaney says such security features are so important that his research firm won't give its approval to the iPhone as a business tool until the features become available. And Silva, who recently worked on a report titled "[The iPhone is Not Meant for Enterprises,](#)" named security as the top reason the iPhone is not currently suitable for business use.

Forrester's Silva says he thinks a mail client with more robust encryption could be on the horizon. Mahdavi also expects to see new applications that attempt to address these security-related concerns.

3) Improved PIM Tools and Synchronization

Security also poses an issue with personal information management (PIM) tools for iPhones, one of the first likely add-ons to appear, says In-Stat's Hughes, who predicts it will be between three and sixth months before any applications developed using the new SDK hit the market.

"Users want truly mindless synchronization of personal information, but when security's a concern, the more mindless the synchronization--i.e., there's no password necessary--the larger the problem," Hughes says. New PIM tools for the iPhone will have to emphasize security while finding a balance between ease of use and safety, he says.

The SDK release could lead to improved synchronization applications for personal information and media, namely over-the-air calendar and contact syncing, which is not currently available to iPhone users, Dulaney says. Apple could also announce new support for Microsoft's ActiveSync functionality, Dulaney says.

Finally, don't forget the Exchange equation: Scott Gamble, senior director of strategic development at Alliance Data, a payments firm, and a business iPhone user, says the most valuable application that could be released for his iPhone would be one that provides better integration and sync capability between his smartphone and Microsoft Exchange Server.

4) Ability to Mash Up Existing Applications

Mahdavi thinks the most valuable development to come from the iPhone SDK release may be the ability to more directly integrate, or mash up, different functionality from a number of applications.

"The mashup is the key ability of the iPhone," Mahdavi says. Because the device runs on a full-featured version of Mac OS X it has the ability to provide tremendous functionality that's simply not available on Windows Mobile or BlackBerry devices, he says.

For instance, the Google Maps application that's currently available on the iPhone could be integrated with users' address books to, say, send an SMS text to all contacts within a specific geographic region by simply drawing a circle around that region and selecting the appropriate contacts, Mahdavi says.

"There's nothing like that available for devices running on the BlackBerry OS, at least that I know of," Mahdavi says.

5) Mobile Field Applications for CRM, Sales, and Service

Silva expects that more and more business specific applications developed for iPhone, like those from companies like SAP, which offers a mobile ERP application, and Oracle, which has its own Siebel CRM mobile application, will become available following the SDK's release. Such applications are already popular on the BlackBerry platform and Windows Mobile.