

BEYOND THE DOWNLOAD

Stability.

Engagement.

[**Expansion.**]

A Government Leader's Guide to
Marketing Mobile Apps, Driving
Citizen Adoption, and Delivering
Public Value

Court Bluford

A SEE FRAMEWORK BOOK

Beyond the Download

A Government Leader's Guide to Marketing Mobile Apps, Driving Citizen Adoption, and Delivering Public Value

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Introduction: The Download Is Not the Finish Line

Most government apps are already launched. Maybe yours is one of them. It went live, there was a press release, a ribbon-cutting post, a bump in downloads. Then it went quiet.

If you haven't launched yet, good. The strategy in this book is the same either way. But you have an advantage: you can start before launch.

And if you're in the middle, with a redesign on the way or just the next update, this works for you too. A new app, a redesign and an update are three starting lines for the same loop. Part Five walks through each one, from pre-launch to the weeks after.

Here's the best thing you can do for any app: get buy-in from the community you want to serve *before* it ships.

I work with a lot of founders. I can usually tell which ones will win. The ones who win are willing to do the marketing and the engagement before the app exists. They build the audience first. The ones who think they need the app first are the ones who struggle.

I learned that the hard way. My app GetBetter was a community for motivated people trying to get better at their corner of life. We shipped it before marketing it. We didn't get buy-in from anyone. We didn't build an audience. We shipped and prayed people would come. They didn't.

Who's telling you this

Let me tell you who I am, because it matters for what comes next.

I'm Court Bluford, and I'm a team of one. I founded Lissiland, and I'm the developer, the marketer, the salesperson, the outreach and the project manager. I've been building mobile apps since 2009. My first launch was VidSeller, an early version of what WhatNot is today. I've shipped more than 50 apps since, for state government agencies, for some of the largest brands in gaming, travel and streaming, and for myself.

My own portfolio is 27 apps on iOS alone: ferry schedules, airport guides, a bus app, sports stats. In one week in October 2026 they were downloaded more than 19,000 times on iOS, not counting Android. MV Ferries alone was 9,990 of those.

No marketing department. No ad agency. No big budget. Every strategy in this book is something I did myself, with less than your agency already has.

That's the point. You don't need a bunch of special things to do this. You need to know your residents, show up where their attention is, and make an app that works. And now, with AI, one person can write, edit, design and analyze what used to take a whole team. The tools aren't the barrier anymore. The playbook is. This is the playbook.

And here's the honest part: it took me nearly a decade of doing this to finally figure it out. Not because it's complicated. It isn't. Nothing in this book is hard to understand. What it takes is effort and execution, every week. I'm handing you the decade so you can skip straight to the effort.

So don't put this book down wondering if you need new software, a new product, or a new this or that. You don't. You can do everything here with the app, the accounts and the people you already have. What changes is the strategy.

Government agencies have something most founders would kill for: a team, a mission, and residents who already need what you do. You don't have to invent demand. You have to meet people where their attention already is.

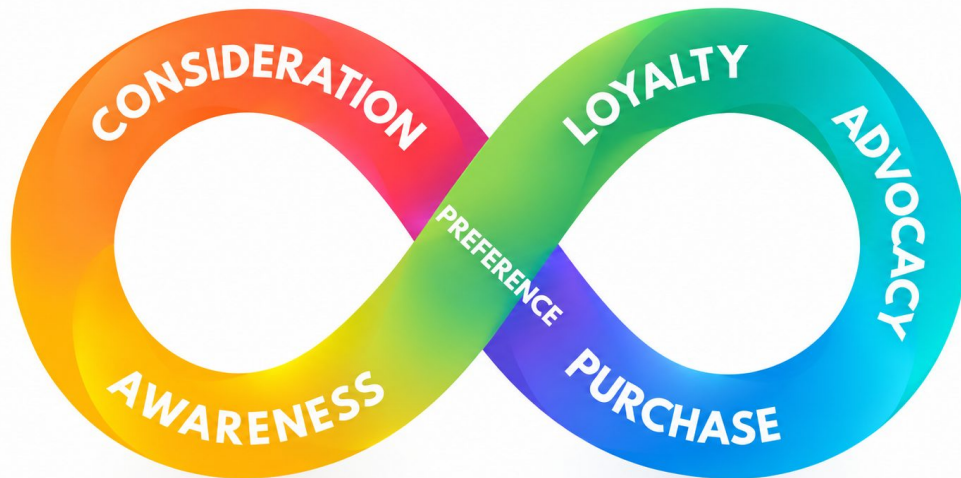
This book is about what happens around the download: how residents find you, why they pick your app over the phone line or the counter, why they keep using it, and why they tell other people about it.

Here's my promise. Follow this playbook and you'll grow your mobile app's usage: more downloads (units) and better App Store conversion.

There's one condition. Your platform has to be stable, even before you're ready to engage your audience. When people arrive, they can't hit crashes, breaks, and issues that stop them from finishing what they came to do. Everything in this book pours people into your app. Make sure it holds water first.

Part One: There Is No Funnel

Chapter 1: Marketing Loops



There is no more funnel. There are marketing loops.

A funnel assumes people pour in at the top, some fall out, and the ones left at the bottom are the win. A loop doesn't end at the download. Awareness leads to consideration. Consideration leads to preference. Preference leads to the download. The download leads to loyalty. Loyalty leads to advocacy. And advocacy creates awareness for someone new. Around it goes.

Ask yourself: how do *you* find new apps to download? Friends. Family. Or stalking what other people use, right? The same should happen for your agency's app.

Spreading the word happens two ways.

First, the app earns it. When the app is genuinely useful, friends and family share it because of how functional it is for them. Not because you told them to. Not because of push notifications or email campaigns. Because it saved them a phone call, a trip, or a headache.

Second, the handles capture attention. We're in a phase of social media that's based on interests, not on who you follow. The algorithm decides what people see, and it will keep deciding. It's in the platform's best interest to deliver the most relevant content to each user.

If you have one handle that talks about many different things, it may or may not reach the person you want. If you have many handles and each one talks to one kind of person, that content keeps getting delivered to them, more and more. They share it. That's the snowball that introduces you to new people, whether they've ever used your app or not.

The rest of this book is how to run both sides of that loop. None of it is complicated. It's effort and execution.

Part Two: Get the Download

Chapter 2: Map Your Agency the Way Residents See It

Your org chart is not how residents see you. They see the one thing they need from you today.

Let's use a worked example for the rest of this book. Say you're a state department of transportation, and you have an app (or you're about to) for the highways in your state: safety, road closures, maintenance, and more.

Start by listing every area of service a resident might care about. For a DOT, that's at least fifteen:

#	DOT service area	What residents look for
1	Road closures and traffic alerts	Closures, detours, construction zones, lane restrictions, incidents
2	Road maintenance and repairs	Pothole repairs, resurfacing, damaged roads, street maintenance
3	Road and traffic safety	Dangerous intersections, crash prevention, speed limits, school zones, safety campaigns
4	Construction and infrastructure projects	Road expansions, bridge construction, project timelines, construction updates
5	Winter weather and snow removal	Snowplow tracking, icy roads, salting schedules, winter travel advisories
6	Bridges and tunnels	Inspections, weight restrictions, tunnel closures, structural maintenance
7	Traffic signals and road signs	Broken lights, missing signs, malfunctioning signals, pedestrian crossings
8	Public transportation and transit	Bus routes, schedules, service disruptions, transit accessibility
9	Pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure	Sidewalks, bike lanes, crosswalks, walking trails, pedestrian safety
10	Parking and curbside management	Parking restrictions, public parking, accessible parking, loading zones
11	Emergency transportation management	Evacuation routes, disaster response, emergency closures, incident updates

#	DOT service area	What residents look for
12	Freight and commercial transportation	Truck routes, oversized-load permits, freight corridors, commercial restrictions
13	Transportation planning and development	Future projects, transportation plans, public meetings, community feedback
14	Environmental and sustainability programs	EV charging, emissions reduction, stormwater drainage, green transportation
15	Citizen service requests and reporting	Report potholes, damaged signs, debris, flooding, hazards; track request status

Now flip it. Who are the people behind those needs? A daily commuter doesn't care about oversized-load permits. A truck driver cares a lot. A parent cares about school zones. A cyclist cares about bike lanes. Each of those people is a citizen avatar, and each one deserves content made for them.

Your agency is the same. Parks and Rec isn't one audience: someone loves the hiking trails and doesn't care about the playgrounds, and someone else only cares about rec league sports. The DMV isn't one audience either.

***Agency:** Do this exercise with the people who answer the phones. They already know who calls and why.*

Learn their words before you write a word

How do you find out what residents actually call things and what they care about? Use all of it:

- **App store reviews:** yours, and those of similar apps from other agencies.
- **Search terms:** what people type into the store, into Google, and into your website's search box.
- **Reddit and local forums:** the city subreddit, neighborhood groups, community boards.
- **Call-center notes:** the exact words people use when they call.
- **Social media:** comments, replies, and posts where people complain, ask, or brag about your service.

While you're in there, keep a running list of content ideas. Every repeated question is a post. Every complaint is an episode. Every "I didn't know you could do that" is a clip. You're not just learning their language; you're filling your content calendar for free.

Chapter 3: Many Handles, One Agency

Keep your main agency handle. Then build one handle per citizen avatar.

For our DOT, that looks like this on Instagram:

Citizen avatar	Handle	Content focus
Daily commuters	@MyDailyCommute	Traffic, congestion, road closures, detours
Parents and families	@SafeRoutesForFamilies	School zones, pedestrian safety, child safety
Neighborhood residents	@MyNeighborhoodRoads	Potholes, repairs, road maintenance
Truck drivers	@TruckRouteUpdates	Freight routes, bridge restrictions, road closures
Cyclists	@BikeSafeRoutes	Bike lanes, cycling safety, route updates
Pedestrians	@WalkSafeStreets	Sidewalks, crosswalks, walking safety
Rural residents	@RuralRoadUpdates	Rural highways, bridges, weather conditions
Business owners	@RoadworkBusinessUpdates	Construction, access disruptions, parking
Winter travelers	@WinterRoadWatch	Snow removal, ice warnings, road conditions
Public transit riders	@MyTransitUpdates	Bus schedules, route changes, transit alerts
Young drivers	@DriveSmartStaySafe	Distracted driving, speed awareness, road safety
Community advocates	@ShapeOurStreets	Transportation projects, public input, planning
Emergency preparedness	@RoadSafetyAlerts	Emergency closures, flooding, evacuation routes
EV drivers	@EVRoadReady	EV infrastructure, charging, sustainable mobility
Construction followers	@RoadProjectsNearMe	Road projects, construction milestones, improvements

Each handle talks to one person. That's why the algorithm keeps delivering it to them.

Name it so it can be found

I find handles by being as obvious as possible about what the content is about. Think of it like an exact-match domain: the handle should be simple and searchable, so someone looking for bike routes in your state types it and finds you. The name on the channel can be different, something more marketable. The handle gets you found. The name gets you remembered.

Flood the airways

The goal on social media is to flood the platforms with content made for one ideal customer profile at a time. For our DOT, that means a bicycle channel with bike-specific content that's strictly for cyclists. It speaks to them, it targets them, and it works with bike content creators in their area. That audience also gets its own custom product page in the store and its own landing page on the web. From the first post to the download, every step talks to a cyclist.

Then do that for every avatar on your list.

How to pitch it to your director

You'll hear it: "Why do we need fifteen accounts? We have one." Here's the answer.

Many handles isn't spraying the same content everywhere. It's narrow content aimed at a narrow audience. One account talking to everyone reaches no one in particular. Fifteen accounts each talking to one kind of resident get higher engagement, and a higher return of value for the same effort. Multiple audiences, each one actually listening.

And remember, you don't start with fifteen. You start with one handle, prove it, and grow from there.

Tier 1 content: faceless, quiet, real

Fill those handles with quiet, faceless content. Literally no faces. Someone doing the daily work, with no audio or just the ambient sound of the room. ASMR-style videos on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, and live streams too.

- A crew filling potholes at dawn, with only the sound of the road.
- A conference room on mute, where people can watch the work happen without hearing a word.
- A snowplow route from the cab at 4 a.m.

Never show the person being served. Keep screens, documents, and plates out of frame. Get consent from the staff on camera. Faceless only works if it's private, too.

***Agency:** Get your communications office and counsel on board before the first post.*

How many handles, who runs them, how often

Start with only as many handles as you have personas: your ideal resident profiles. Fifteen is the DOT's full map, not a day-one requirement. Each handle exists so you can speak to just one of those people.

In fact, you can start with one platform and one avatar. As it grows, add more avatars and more handles. You don't have to do it all at once.

Your social media manager or managers still run them. What changes is the copy and the visuals: every post should talk directly to that handle's persona, not to "the public."

Post as much as you possibly can. Once or twice an hour if you can, and at the very least once a day. The algorithm rewards consistency, and every post is another test of what that persona responds to.

Here's why daily matters. The more you post, the more information the algorithm has to find the right audience for your content. Post once a day and the algorithm gets 30 chances that month to find your people. Post more and it happens faster.

This is where most teams quit. Not because posting is hard, but because posting every day is work. That's the whole secret: there isn't one. The teams that win are the ones that keep showing up.

Or let creators run the handles

You don't have to make all the content yourself. I did this with the Richmond airport app, Martha's Vineyard Ferries, and the Martha's Vineyard bus app. Those handles ran on user-generated content: I worked with influencers to create them.

That's another option for any agency. Work with individual creators who already speak to a persona. They create the content, in their own voice, on a handle built for that persona, and they point it back to your main account. You get the reach and the authenticity of a real person, and the main account gets a steady stream of clips to pick from.

How do you find them? I search. I follow creators in that niche and that area, and I watch how their posts do, consistently, not just their one viral hit. That's my whole first week of the 90 days. By the end of it, I know who shows up every week and whose audience actually responds.

The deal I made with creators

My creator agreements were simple. I went after smaller creators, and I paid them one of two ways:

- **Per 1,000 views.** A piece of every 1,000 views, the same way we all pay for ads. Set the threshold by your total addressable market (TAM): how many people could actually use the app. My market was small, so paying per 100,000 views would have been unfair to the creators, and even 10,000 was pushing it. So I kept it at 1,000. And don't let "statewide" fool you. Even if your app serves the whole state, "everyone" is not your total addressable market.

That's why you have an ideal customer profile for each handle: everyone doesn't fit in that bucket. The cyclists in your state are the market for the bike channel, not every resident in the state. Set the threshold for the audience that creator is actually reaching.

- **Per 20 referrals.** A referral was a download. Every 20 downloads they sent, they got paid.

Some did it for free. Smaller creators wanted the content, and they wanted to be part of the launch. It helped them break into app marketing. That's the advantage of going small: they're hungry, they're local, and their audience trusts them.

How a government agency pays creators

Mine went through Lissiland. I'm not a government agency, so it was easier for me. An agency usually can't just pay a creator directly, and that's fine. Set it up with a creative firm as a pass-through cost. The firm hires the creators, and you pay the creative firm the total cost. One vendor, one contract, and the creators still get paid the way they're used to.

***Agency:** Put the basics in writing with every creator: what they can and can't film, the privacy rules from Tier 1, disclosure of the partnership, who owns the handle, and how they get paid: per 1,000 views, per 20 downloads, or free.*

Let the creative be creative

Here's what didn't work for me. With my first creators, I gave them brand guidelines and the words to use. It took their creativity away, and their creativity is what I hired them for.

Trust them. They know their audience better than you do. They know how to communicate your points. I call it translating: taking your corporate jargon, or your propaganda, and turning it into something people can actually digest.

More people need to understand this. If you could be the creative, you would do it yourself and not hire them. So once you hire them, let them be creative. Keep the privacy rules and the facts. Let go of the script.

Chapter 4: Shows and Miniseries (Tier 2)

Tier 2 is where it gets fun. Create shows and miniseries: real-life reenactments of true or near-true events. Give people mini-shows to engage with.

Handle	Show concept
@OnTheRoadShow	Stories from the roads and the people behind them
@RoadCrewDiaries	Behind-the-scenes reality show following DOT crews
@RoadsUncovered	What really happens behind road closures and construction
@BehindTheBarricades	Inside roadwork, emergencies, and infrastructure projects
@TheRoadReport	Fast-paced weekly transportation news show
@HighwayHeroesShow	The workers who keep roads safe
@RoadsideStories	Human-interest stories about transportation
@DOTUnscripted	An unscripted look inside the department

A show lets people feel something while you still teach them something. The worry before a storm. The relief when the road reopens. The pride of the crew that pulled it off. Emotion is what gets content shared; education is what you need them to walk away with. You get both.

And every episode is measurable. You'll know which pieces are highly engaging and which aren't, and that tells you what to make more of.

Making shows without a studio

You don't need a network. Bring in creators who already work with government agencies, and let them do what they're good at.

Another format costs almost nothing: **check-ins**. Treat a handle like an agile team in public. Film the morning stand-up, the scrum meeting, the planning board (faceless, and with nothing private on screen). Make the audience part of the process, the way a new teammate would be. Then end every post by asking for *their* morning status in the comments. If you add only one extra account, this one can be the most fun.

The show formula: 30 seconds, one scene, one steady face

Keep every episode to **30 seconds**. You only need **one scene**, and it never changes. You need **one or two main characters** who are always there. Guests can rotate in, but the scene and the main character stay stable and consistent. That consistency is what makes people recognize the show as they scroll.

Using the DOT example: pick one or two highway cleanup workers who always work the same stretch of highway. Use a real highway location, so people notice it when they drive by. Now you have a show. One episode is a crash cleanup. Another is tree removal. Another is animal removal, or picking up traffic cones. Some episodes have guest appearances: a police officer, an EMT, a single driver who stopped to help. That's two or three people per episode, but always the same background.

People start to feel like they know that crew and that stretch of road. When they drive past it, they look for them. That's the show doing its job.

Drop a new episode **once a week**. In between, keep the handle alive with still images or clips: a teaser for the episode coming up, funny moments, or the best bits of past episodes.

An episode, start to finish

Here's one I'd shoot for a DOT. One worker on the back of a truck, putting down cones to block off a lane. But you don't film the truck, the cones or the traffic. You film him at selfie distance, right in his face, like he's filming a selfie while he works. That keeps it low budget: one phone, one face, one background.

It doesn't even have to be on a busy street. You can film it in the middle of nowhere. Add the ambient sound afterward: cars flying by, horns honking, the roar of a highway. The audience hears the traffic and believes it. You never had to close a lane to shoot it.



The episode: one phone, one face, one background. Illustration.

He talks to the camera the whole time. He's putting down "these stupid cones." He talks about how close the cars come to hitting the back of the truck, and why drivers wait until the last second to move over. He jumps like he's about to get hit. He yells at a car. He yells up at the truck driver to speed up, or slow down. You never see the driver and you never hear him answer.

That's it: a 30-second skit of one guy hanging off the back of a truck. It's funny, it's real, and every driver who watches it thinks about him the next time they see cones. That's a safety campaign nobody skips.

When the character grows

Once people know him, he becomes your campaign. Put him in the truck, still holding the phone, driving around the city or town. By now he's a recognizable character to the audience. When people pass that truck on the street, they recognize him, and they post about it. Now residents are making your content for you, and the loop keeps turning.



The campaign: people pass the truck, recognize him and post it. Illustration.

Chapter 5: Head Nod Content and the Clip Farm

Here's something most agencies miss: a lot of your best content won't get likes or comments.

We call it **Head Nod content**. Someone watches it, nods, and thinks, "That's exactly my commute," or "That's my street." They may never like it. They may never comment. But they share it. They send it to their spouse, their group chat, their coworker who drives the same road.

That share is the snowball. It introduces you to people who've never heard of your app, whether they've had a previous experience with you or not. Don't judge your handles only by likes. Judge them by shares and sends.

Clippers point everything home

Clippers, or clip farmers, are the current strategy for a lot of content creators. They take small pieces of content and point them back to the main account.

Do the same. Your niche handles and your shows are the clip farm. The best-performing pieces get picked up by the main agency account. When the main account posts them, it adds a call to action: download the app, turn on alerts for your route, report a pothole.

Proof first, then paid

This is the part that saves public money. You already know the piece did well organically. So when you put paid media behind it, you're not guessing. The content is proven. All you're adding is the CTA to close the deal.

Organic tells you what works. Paid scales what already works.

Where the scaling happens

Once you know a piece of creative works organically, *now* you put media dollars behind it: Meta ads, TikTok ads, TV spots, whatever fits. Add the CTAs and the other conversion pieces, so every view points people exactly where you want them to go: the custom store page, the landing page, the app.

That's where the scaling happens, and here's why it compounds. The organic content already started conversations. Now the person who heard a friend talk about it, but never saw it, sees it. The person who overheard it in someone else's conversation finally gets it. They follow the

account and see that their friends were already following it before them. That's social proof doing the selling for you.

See how that works? Organic builds the word of mouth. Paid puts the proof in front of everyone who was already hearing about it. Now you scale, and it compounds.

***Agency:** This is the opposite of how most campaigns get built, where the agency pays for creative first and hopes it lands.*

Embrace the feedback

Organic and paid will both capture feedback. Some people will love it. Some won't. Embrace both.

Let me be clear about the ones who don't love it: they aren't haters. They just aren't used to the new brand voice yet, or they can't relate to that persona. That's okay. That's exactly why you have multiple handles. They'll fall into one of the other personas, and the more you post, the faster they'll find the one that's for them.

When you start, some people will comment "What is this?!" Anything new, folks don't understand at first. Keep going. As you continue, the content reaches the right people. That's what the first 30 and 60 days are for.

Building a community is partly negative, and that's normal. The algorithm doesn't see negative engagement or positive engagement. It just sees engagement, and it feeds your content to other people either way. A negative comment still pushes the post out. And just because a negative comment is there doesn't mean folks won't defend you. Often your own audience answers it before you do.

Then use it. Every comment, good or bad, is content: new ideas, new engagement, even new platforms to try. The feedback tells you what to make next.

How to know what performed best

Compare every piece against the other posts and handles you've put out. Your own history is the baseline. Then go look for other accounts that post similar content and compare against them too. A clip that beats your own average and holds up next to similar accounts is the one the main account picks up and puts money behind.

Chapter 6: The Front Door, One Store Page per Handle

When someone taps through from @BehindTheBarricades, where do they land? On most agency apps, a generic store page with a screenshot of an office meeting. The journey breaks right there.

App Store Connect lets you create custom product pages: custom copy and custom preview images, up to 70 of them. Google Play has custom store listings too. Use every one you can.

Give each handle its own store page. The creative should talk to the highest-performing campaigns from that handle. So the DOT has a store page for @BehindTheBarricades, one for @WinterRoadWatch, one for @TruckRouteUpdates. When people land there, they know they're in the right place. They continue the journey instead of starting over.

Do the same on the web. Each audience gets its own landing page too, for ads and for links in posts, so the cyclist who taps from the bike channel lands on a page about bike routes, not your agency homepage.

What flopped for me

Here's one that didn't work. Early on, I built a full website for each app and expected people to find it through search. It flopped. The competition for keywords and Google Ads was rough, and people weren't searching for unknown websites. Now, with AI answering more questions directly, they're searching for them even less.

So the landing pages in this book aren't there to be found. They're there to catch the traffic you send: from a handle, a post, a creator or an ad. Build them as destinations, not as a search strategy.

Let the creatives do their thing.

The rest of the front door

Everything from the ASO trust stack still applies:

- **Icon:** recognizable and official.
- **Title and subtitle:** resident actions, not internal program names.

- **Screenshot one:** problem, solution, trust signal.
- **My horizontal-preview trick:** on the App Store, I upload horizontal preview images and place vertical screenshots inside them. That fits more screenshots into the first image someone sees and gives me more room for copy.
- **Hidden keywords:** text in my screenshots set in the same color as the background. People don't see it; the store's text recognition does. It works for me today, and it may not work forever. If you're an agency, run it past counsel and your communications office first.

Here's what that looks like on my Richmond airport app. The first is the standard tall phone preview. The second is the horizontal version: it's still a real view of the app's screen, but now there's far more real estate around the screenshot for copy and creative.

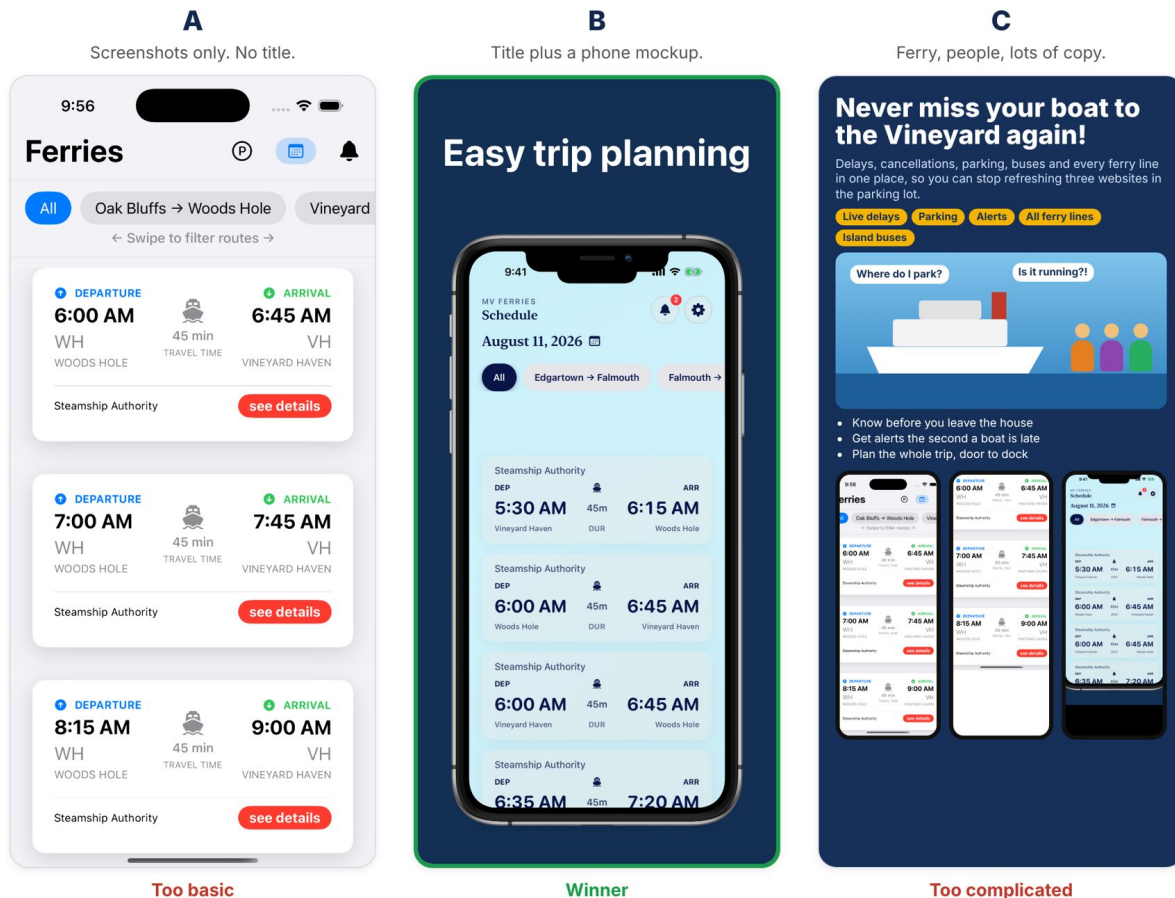
What moved my downloads the most

On my own apps, two changes did the most: the **App Store preview images** and the **title and subtitle combination**.

For the title, I use the app name plus a keyword. For the subtitle, I don't write a description; I use a phrase the audience already uses on social media. The title helps the store find you. The subtitle makes people feel like the app was made by someone who talks like them.

The MV Ferries test: A, B and C

Here's a real test from my own app.



A and B are the real store images. C was deleted after the test; this is a recreation of what it looked like.

A, the control: just screenshots of the app. No title, no visuals to complement them, not even a phone. Just screenshots that met the size requirements.

B: the title, plus a phone mockup with a screenshot inside it.

C: visuals of the ferry, people, various screens, and screenshots in the phone with the title, each one talking to a specific pain point. C was so bad I deleted every record of it, so the C in the figure is a recreation. Picture a bunch of copy and smaller screenshots.

B won.

A was too basic. Nobody knew what the app was doing. C was too complicated. People came to the page with one question: can you fix my issue, can you help me find delay info, or not? B won because it clearly said what the app does and showed the screens that do it.

That's the lesson for every agency store page. Don't make people guess, and don't make them read a brochure. Say what it does, show it doing it, and let them go.

Speak their language on the store page

Another strategy I use: I create the store listing in multiple languages. Not the app itself, just the store content.

Spanish goes on every app. Every one. For my Martha's Vineyard apps, I add Portuguese too, because the island has a large Brazilian population. Then look at the most common languages in your area or state beyond those, and create store content for them as well.

Don't make the mistake of just translating your English content. Each language should target its own phrases and keywords, the words those residents actually search for. That's what expands your reach.

Here's how I split it:

- **App name:** keep it the same in every language.
- **Subtitle:** similar, but not the same.
- **Keywords, description and promotional text:** different. Written for that audience, around what they search for.

Clones are a gift

I know the concern: clone apps, competing apps, lesser versions of yours. Unlike the private sector, a government app is often the only one that can actually do what it does. But you'll still find clones.

I think that's the best thing that can happen to your app, as long as you've done the rest of the work: a stable app that engages people and is easy to find. Things become more or less valuable when people can compare them to something, and when the right audience sees the comparison. People take for granted whatever is the only thing in a space. When competitors come along, done right, they make yours more valuable.

So make sure everyone can tell which one is yours:

- **Put your seal or official mark on the app icon.**
- **Put it in the preview images too.**
- **Say it in the description:** "The official app for..."

And keep those lesser apps around. Don't fight to get them taken down. Let people see them next to YOURS. Better visuals. A better description. Real craft, not AI everywhere. I assure you, people can tell when they're reading words and looking at images whether they were made by AI or by a copywriter or graphic designer. Use AI to move faster behind the scenes. Put human-made work on the front door.

Use the hero and featured images

Apple now lets every app add a header, or hero, image and a featured image to its store presence. Neither one needs to show the app's screens. They're pure creative, and they can be an image or a video. It used to be that only the top apps on the App Store got to do this. Now anyone willing to make them can.

Most agencies won't bother. That's exactly why you should. It's one more place to stand out, and it's the first thing people see.

Be early to the newest features

Here's another way to get ahead of a competitor. When Apple or Google releases a new feature, API or SDK, use it in your app as soon as it's available. It doesn't have to be a core focus of your app. The stores love showcasing their newest work, especially in places that aren't obvious, and a government app using it is exactly that kind of story.

Then make sure they notice. Call it out in your description and in your review notes when you submit, so the store recognizes what you built with their tools.

Part Three: Keep Them

Chapter 7: Function Is the Marketing

The first way the loop spreads is the app itself. People share apps that work for them. So the most important retention strategy is the boring one: the app does the one thing they came for, fast, every time.

I've built both kinds. I've tried creating the most social of social apps: fun, creative, unique, one-of-a-kind apps in the spirit of Uber, Facebook and Instagram. Those did well. But they didn't do as well as the functional, purposeful ones, the apps that fit right in with GovTech. The ferry schedule. The airport guide. The bus app. They aren't flashy or special. They're just functional and stable.

That should be good news for every agency. You don't need to build the next big social app. You need to build the useful one, and keep it working.

My own ferry app, MV Ferries, gets most of its use on bad-weather days. That's when people need it. In one October week it had 9,990 iOS downloads. Nobody had to be told to share it. The weather did the marketing, and the app had to be ready when they showed up.

And the people did the rest. Word of mouth. I see folks talking about the app as a resource in the Islands Talk Facebook group. That's the loop working: residents recommending it to each other.

Skip the onboarding. Shorten Time to Fun.

In the first minute, a user should skip onboarding. It's boring. I don't do onboarding for any of my apps: not the Richmond airport app, not the ferries, not the bus app. People use apps enough now. And in government tech, your UX isn't so complicated that folks can't figure it out. We get it. Show me my stuff.

Open with a visual that welcomes them straight to the information, or to creating an account. The goal is to be valuable to them immediately.

I call it **Time to Fun**: the time between opening the app and getting what they came for. You want that to be minimal. Very, very small. And it shouldn't be defined by what your team decided in a meeting room. The question is: what do they want? Give them that immediately.

If they need to sign in, tell them why, in their terms: "Here for your route alerts, your permit, or your request status? Sign in and see it right away." Then ask for as little information as possible

to get them there.

Make it about them, for real

Think of it this way: the best conversations are the ones where we get to talk about ourselves the most. Users feel the same about apps. The best apps today are the ones where they get to experience themselves the most: what entertains them, and what they need. Not the ones that push them to engage their friends. Not the ones where they hear more about the organization.

And this isn't personalization. Personalization is still about the org. Make the app genuinely about the user, not performatively about them, and they'll stick. Then they'll bring others, and the loop keeps turning.

Chapter 8: Turn Off the Push

I'm going to say something most app teams don't want to hear: remove push notifications and in-app messages completely, unless you can direct them to specific people.

I'm very against blanket push and in-app messages. I see people all the time who think it helps their app, when really it pushes people away. "Don't miss the deadline!" sent to everyone is noise to almost everyone.

The only push worth sending is about a specific topic, centered on that specific user. The truck driver who opted into bridge restrictions on one corridor. The parent who follows one school zone. The commuter who saved one route.

You don't need a complicated third-party service to do it. You can do it with Firebase and a few functions: when a user picks an interest or a category, add them to that topic; when they drop it, remove them. Then send only to that topic. You can do the same with AWS or Supabase.

***Vendor:** Build interest-based topics from day one. It's less work than a marketing platform and it's the only push residents will thank you for.*

Email and text are different

Email and SMS are okay. They give the user control. Push is intrusive.

It's like phone calls versus texts. Many people in younger generations prefer a text because they can answer on their own time. A call forces you to either talk right now or miss it. Push is the phone call. Email and text let residents deal with you when they're ready.

To be clear, I don't run email marketing or SMS marketing on my own apps, and I don't do personalization. The app does the work. If your agency already sends email or texts, keep them opt-in and about what the resident chose, never a blast.

Chapter 9: Listen Out Loud

My own rhythm is the same on every app. Every week, and some parts daily, I check Google Play Console, App Store Connect, the reviews, and Google Analytics. I look for outliers first, then for common issues.

The first number I open

The first thing I look at is conversion rate. Then traffic sources and product page views. Google Analytics shows me what people do once they're in.

Here's why. If someone gets all the way to the product page and sees the screenshots, I want them to download. They made it to the last step. If they didn't download, something on that page needs to be reviewed: the preview images, the title and subtitle, the rating, or the wrong audience being sent there. Traffic tells me who's showing up. Conversion tells me whether the front door works.

Connect the dots in Search Console

You can now connect your social media accounts to Google Search Console and see how people find that content in relation to your website. You can connect your Google Play Console to Search Console too. Put them together and you can follow the path: someone searches, finds a post or a page, and ends up on your store listing. That tells you which handles and which content are actually feeding downloads, not just getting views.

Then I take what I learn to wherever I can reach current users: Reddit, LinkedIn, email. I engage daily, or as often as users allow. I respond, I ask questions, and I get more insights. As I fix things, I turn the fixes into content and talk about what's coming next. That content feeds the loop.

I still remember one review. It was for MV Ferries, my own app. One star, titled "Awful," from a user named Wexstasy on November 12, 2025:

"Terrible interface - worse than the website (if that's possible.)"

Four days later, I replied publicly:

“Good to know. Lets improve it. Email me, cbluford@lissiland.com and lets work together on improving it.”

Here’s the part I want you to hear. That one-star review was earned. I was trying to do everything at once: login, tracking, push, location, and more. The rider didn’t need any of that. They just wanted the ferry information.

That review sent me into UI/UX courses, and then into behavioral science and economics. It’s why I don’t do onboarding anymore, why I’m so against blanket push, and why I care so much about Time to Fun. Every app I’ve built since is better for it.

Answer every review in public, especially the bad ones. Thank them, own it, and invite them in. Everyone who reads the review later reads your reply too.

Part Four: Prove Public Value

Chapter 10: Measure What Leaders Care About

A good leader cares about acquisition. A great leader cares about retention.

Take care of your own and they'll echo you. They'll do the marketing for you, as part of the loop. That's why you engage, and why you build the app to be stable for current users. Dominate the current user experience and own your retention metrics, and that will handle the expansion. The growth comes from there.

I had a great experience with a travel agent once. Then twice. My wife and I were stranded in Antigua because of storms, and our travel agent got us on a flight home so we weren't stuck in the airport for another day. That was over eight years ago. I still tell family, friends, and anyone I hear talking about a trip: use a travel agent, and I know a good one. RanJan Travel, out of Philadelphia, PA. There are others, I'm sure. But that's the one I tell people about.

RanJan doesn't have to pay for that. They don't have to run a knowledge-gap marketing campaign to explain why travel agents still matter. I do it for them.

That's what retention buys you. Report it that way.

Start with what your director is looking for

There's no one report that works for every director. Before you build it, ask what they're actually looking for. Growth in 90 days? In four months, six months, a year? Positive sentiment in benchmark studies? Build the report around their answer. Here's what I pick from:

- Retention first: returning users, repeat task completion, and how many current users bring someone new.
- Adoption: downloads per handle and per custom store page, active users.
- Loop health: shares and sends per piece, which handles feed the main account, which promoted clips convert.
- Public value: calls avoided, office visits avoided, payments on time, requests reported and closed.
- Time to Fun: how fast people get what they came for. Push it as low as it can go.

Don't chase time in app

We don't care about time in app increasing past a certain point. Keeping people in the app is the organization's selfish goal, and for many apps it isn't even the point.

With screen time reports and "phone addiction" in the conversation, think about what people see when they check their usage on their phone. You don't want to be at the top of that list. You want to be the best tool on the tool belt: they open it, do what they need, and keep moving.

Set a target for each task. State lotteries are government apps too, and they make a good example. Buying a Mega Millions or Powerball ticket should take under five minutes if someone is registering for the first time, and under two minutes if they already have an account.

It changes a bit for iLottery, where people play games in the app. There you do want them to enjoy it, but responsibly. Think 20 to 30 minutes in a session, not more. Make it stable and engaging enough that they come back later, when they have free time.

Every agency can set the same kind of targets for its own core tasks: renewing a registration, paying a ticket, checking a bus.

Chapter 11: The 90-Day Loop Plan

Sharpen the ax first. Chopping the trees gets a lot easier.

Notice what's not in this plan: a big agency contract, a rebrand, a custom platform. It's setup, then effort, then refinement.

- **Days 1–30: Set up the foundation.** Map the service areas and citizen avatars. Create the accounts and give each handle a simple, searchable name and its voice. Spend the first week finding creators and watching how their posts do, week after week. Plan the first Tier 2 show: the scene, the main characters, the first episodes. Fix the store page and build a custom store page for each handle. Set up interest-based push topics. If you haven't launched the app yet, start here anyway and build the audience first. All of this setup is what makes posting consistently easy later. If you have a launch, a redesign or a big update coming, line these 90 days up with the launch checklist in Appendix F.
- **Days 31–60: Execute and post.** This month is all posting. Spray and pray. Put out lots of content on every handle and see what works on each account. Don't overthink it; you're collecting data. Post at least once a day, so the algorithm has 30 days to find each handle's audience. Expect some "What is this?!" comments early. Keep going.
- **Days 61–90: Refine.** Look at each handle on its own. Find the post formats that captured the most attention and interest, and shift that handle toward them. Promote the proven clips through the main account with a CTA, and put paid media only behind the winners. Report loop and public-value numbers to leadership.

What it costs

The honest answer: it depends. If you hire a vendor, it varies by vendor. If you do it in-house, it depends on the effort and the knowledge gap of your team. AI helps bridge that gap: writing, editing, captions, design and analysis that used to need a specialist. What it doesn't replace is the effort of showing up every day.

How much time it takes

The longest part is the setup. That's why it gets the whole first 30 days. Once it's set up, it's maintenance, and maintenance takes considerably less time.

Part Five: Launch Moments

Chapter 12: Three Starting Lines

Everything in this book works whether your app is brand new, getting a redesign, or just shipping an update. The loop is the same. What changes is where you start and what you're protecting.

	New app	Redesign	Update to an existing app
What you have	No users, no ratings, no history	Users, ratings and habits	Users, ratings, habits and a working app
What you're protecting	Your first impression	The habits people already rely on	Stability and your rating
Biggest risk	Launching to silence	Breaking what loyal users know	Nobody noticing
Where the handles start	60 to 90 days before launch	30 to 60 days before release	Already running; point them at the update
Store page focus	Build from scratch, then test	Rebuild the screenshots, keep the trust	Promotional text, What's New, and a product page test
Biggest win	A waitlist that downloads on day one	Loyal users who defend the change	Turning every fix into content

Here's the mindset shift. Every release is a launch. Most agencies treat launch day as the one big moment and every update after it as maintenance. That's backwards. Every update is a new reason to talk to people, a new store page, a new piece of content, and a new chance to win back someone who deleted the app.

Before any starting line: is it stable?

I said it in the introduction and I'll keep saying it. Don't pour people into an app that leaks. Before any launch, redesign or update goes out, check the basics:

- Crash-free sessions are where you want them in testing, on the devices your residents actually use, including older phones.
- The one thing people come for works end to end: the ferry time, the flight status, the permit, the payment.
- It works on a slow connection and with the phone's text size turned up.

- Login, if you have it, doesn't trap people. They can see something useful before you ask for anything.
- You have someone watching crash reports, reviews and support email on launch day and the week after.

If any of those fail, move the date. A late launch is forgotten in a week. A broken launch shows up in your reviews for years.

Chapter 13: Pre-Launch: Build the Crowd Before the Stage

This is the chapter for the app that hasn't launched yet. It's also the chapter for a redesign, because a redesign is a relaunch to people who already have opinions.

Remember the founders who win: they build the audience before the app exists. An agency can do the same, and it has a head start. You already have residents who need you.

How I launched the Richmond airport app

Here's how I actually did it.



First, research. I went through Reddit, the airport's website and social media to see what was most frustrating for travelers. Those frustrations became the app.

Second, focus. People are exhausted by apps that are for everyone. So I built for one airport, and the plan was to dominate it. Not every airport in the country. Richmond.

Third, I engaged before I launched. I reached out to Richmond travel agencies and companies, to advertisers inside the airport, and to influencers. Not only influencers in Richmond, but also the ones who travel to Richmond. That did two things at once: it validated the idea, and it built interest.

Fourth, the landing page. I built one for Meta ads and social media where people could sign up to be notified about the project's progress. For some apps, I skip the sign-up and send people straight to the pre-order page in the App Store.

Here's the cheat code. Both Google Play Console and App Store Connect let people sign up before launch: pre-registration on Google Play, pre-order on the App Store. All of those people get the app the day it goes live. So on launch day, or on a big update day, the app gets hundreds or thousands of downloads in the first hours. In my experience, that burst is how apps climb into the top charts. If you want your app to trend, this is how.

Government apps can do exactly the same thing, and the next sections are the timeline for it.

Let your most loyal in on the secret

If you already have an app out there and you have a loyalty program, or you can simply recognize your most loyal audience, use them. Bring them into part of the "secret" development of the new project, whether it's a new app or a redesign.

It's like a pro team letting the fans pick the new team name. The fans feel exclusive, they feel like it's theirs, and they can't help but brag to people about the secret project they're working on. That bragging is word of mouth you couldn't buy.

Give them a real say in something small and visible: a name, a feature, the first screen. Then, when you launch, they're not just users. They're the people who helped build it, and they'll tell everyone.

90 to 60 days out: start the handles

Start the handles before you have anything to download. Set them up, give them their voice, and start the Tier 1 content. Show the work that's going into the app: the crew, the planning board, the testing (faceless, nothing private on screen). People love watching something get built. And when the app arrives, they feel like they were part of it.

This is also when you start learning their words. Read the reviews of the old app or the website, the call-center notes, the comments. That's where your store page copy will come from.

60 to 30 days out: open the doors early

- **Start a waitlist.** A simple page with one field for email or phone number, and one sentence on what the app will do for them. Email and text are fine here: they asked for it.
- **Open a beta.** On iOS, TestFlight lets you invite up to 10,000 outside testers with a public link. On Android, use a closed or open testing track in Google Play Console. Put the beta link on the handles. Your testers are your first fans and your first reviewers.
- **Turn on pre-registration or pre-order.** Google Play lets people pre-register, and it can download the app automatically on launch day for people who opt in. On the App Store, you can put an app up for pre-order up to 180 days before release. Either way, every handle now has something to point to before launch.
- **Brief the people inside.** Front-desk staff, call-center agents, field crews and the communications office should all know the app is coming and what to say about it. They talk to more residents than any ad ever will.

30 days out to launch: load the front door

- **Build the store pages.** The default page plus a custom product page for each handle (Chapter 6). Title with the app name plus a keyword. A subtitle in the phrase the audience uses on social media. Preview images that show the one thing they came for.
- **Write your launch content now.** Every handle needs launch-week posts ready to go: a teaser, the launch post, a how-to, and the first “here’s what you told us” post.
- **Prepare your review replies.** Write short replies for the reviews you can predict: “Where’s feature X?”, “I can’t log in,” “Why do I need this when there’s a website?” Have them ready to adjust and post.
- **Set up deep links.** Universal Links on iOS and App Links on Android, so a link to a route, a bridge, or a request opens that exact screen in the app. Appendix D shows how I set up one link that works everywhere. Add a Smart App Banner to your website so people on their phones see the app at the top of the page.
- **Ask for featuring.** App Store Connect has a featuring nomination form. Tell Apple what the app is, who it helps and when it launches. Government apps that solve a real problem are a story editors can tell.
- **Get your sign-offs.** Communications office, counsel, accessibility review, privacy labels and data safety forms. Do it now, not the night before.

Chapter 14: Launch Week

Launch week is about two things: the app holding up, and the loop starting to turn.

Release it in stages

On the App Store, use phased release. It rolls the update out to people with automatic updates over seven days: 1%, 2%, 5%, 10%, 20%, 50%, then 100%. You can pause it if something breaks. Anyone can still download it manually, so new users aren't held back. Google Play has staged rollouts, where you pick the percentage yourself and raise it as the numbers hold.

Use this for a new app's first update, for a redesign, and for every update after that. It's cheap insurance.

Watch the right numbers, every day

- Store conversion first: how many people who see the page download the app. Then traffic sources and product page views.
- Crashes and errors, by device and by OS version.
- Reviews and ratings, on both stores.
- Time to Fun: how fast new users get to what they came for.
- Support email and call volume about the app.

Check them every day of launch week. I check the consoles and the reviews weekly on every app I run, and some parts daily. Launch week is all daily.

Make noise in the right order

1. **Day one:** the waitlist gets the email or text first. They asked for it.
2. **Same day:** every handle posts its launch content, each pointing to its own custom product page.
3. **The main account** posts the launch, then picks up the best-performing handle posts over the week.
4. **Front-line staff** start telling people at the counter, on the phone and in the field.

5. **Paid media waits.** Proof first, then paid. Let organic tell you which pieces work before you put money behind anything.

Answer every review

The first reviews set the tone for everyone who reads them later. Reply to every one, good and bad, in public, the way I did with Wexstasy. Thank them, own it, and invite them in. When you fix what they asked for, say so in the reply and in a post.

Ask for ratings at the right moment

Ask for a rating after a success moment: right after they found their ferry time, paid the ticket, or got the alert they wanted. Never on first open. Never in the middle of a task.

Use the built-in prompts. On iOS, the system review prompt can show up to three times in a year for each user, so don't waste it. Google Play has its own in-app review API with its own limits. Both let people rate without leaving the app.

Chapter 15: The Redesign

A redesign is the riskiest launch you'll do. You have users who already know where everything is, and you're about to move it.

Protect the habits

Find the two or three things people do most. They have to be just as easy to reach in the new design, or easier, on the first day. Everything else can move. Those can't.

Keep what they've already set up. Saved routes, favorites, accounts and settings have to carry over. Nothing loses a loyal user faster than an update that makes them start over.

Tell them before you show them

Use the handles to show the redesign coming: the old screen next to the new one, the reason for the change, and what residents said that led to it. When people understand why, they defend the change instead of fighting it.

Invite your most active users into the beta first, and let them in on the secret early (Chapter 13). If they like it, they'll be the ones answering the angry comments for you.

Release it carefully

- Use phased release or a staged rollout. Watch the reviews and the support inbox at every step.
- Write the What's New text for the user, not the team: what's easier now, in their words. Skip "bug fixes and performance improvements."
- Rebuild the screenshots and preview images. Old screenshots on a new design break trust the moment someone opens the app.

Your old ratings

When you release a new version on the App Store, you can choose to reset the rating summary. People's written reviews stay, but the star average starts over.

Only do it when the old rating was earned by problems the redesign actually fixed. If your rating is good, keep it: a high rating with a lot of reviews is one of the strongest trust signals on the

page. If you reset, plan to ask for ratings at success moments right away, so the new average fills in fast.

Chapter 16: Every Update Is a Launch

Most agencies ship updates quietly. The store says “bug fixes and performance improvements,” nobody notices, and the update does nothing for the loop.

Treat every update as a reason to talk.

Before the update

- **Pick the one thing.** Each update gets one headline for residents, even if it has twenty changes inside. That’s the post, the What’s New text and the store creative.
- **Write What’s New for people.** Lead with what they can do now. “See ferry delays before you leave the house” beats “Improved schedule module.”
- **Line up the content.** The fix becomes the content. Every handle that cares about that change gets a post about it. If a review asked for it, reply to that review when it ships.

Use the store tools you already have

- **Promotional text** on the App Store sits above the description, holds up to 170 characters, and can be changed any time without shipping a new version. Use it for what’s timely: the storm season, the new route, the deadline.
- **In-app events** on the App Store and **promotional content** on Google Play put a card on your store page and in search for something happening in the app: a new feature, a seasonal service, a deadline. They give people who already deleted the app a reason to come back.
- **Product page tests.** On the App Store, product page optimization lets you test up to three versions of your icon, screenshots and preview videos against your current page. Google Play has store listing experiments. Run one with every major update. Let the residents vote with their downloads, not the team in the meeting room.

After the update

- Watch the same numbers as launch week for the first seven days.
- Answer the reviews that mention the update.
- Tell the people who asked for it. Reply to the review, post it on the handle that cares, and thank them by name if they said it was okay.

- Move the winning store creative into the default page and the custom pages.

Then do it again next update. Every release is another turn of the loop.

Final Word: Effort and Execution

If you take one thing from this book, take this: none of it is complicated.

Know who your residents are. Name a handle for each of them. Post what they care about, every day. Build a store page that says what the app does and shows it doing it. Make the app work, fast, every time. Listen to the reviews and answer them. Put money only behind what already works. Then do it again.

That's it. I've spent nearly a decade doing this, getting it wrong, and finally figuring it out. I did it as one person, without a marketing department, an ad agency or a big budget. You have more than I had: a team, a mission, and residents who already need what you do. And with AI, the work that used to take a room full of people can be done by a few.

So the only thing standing between your app and the residents who need it is effort and execution. You don't need new software. You don't need new products. You don't need special things. You need a change in strategy, and then you need to start, and keep going.

I'll see you in the store.

Appendix A: Citizen Avatar and Handle Worksheet

Use this to build your own version of the DOT tables from Chapters 2, 3 and 4. Do it with the people who answer the phones.

Step 1: List your service areas. Every area a resident might care about, in their words, not your org chart's.

#	Service area	What residents look for (their words)
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		

Step 2: Turn them into people. Who is behind each need? One row per citizen avatar.

Citizen avatar	Handle	Content focus	Where I heard their words
	@		
	@		
	@		
	@		
	@		
	@		
	@		
	@		

Step 3: Pick your first show. One for now. You can add more after day 90.

Question	Your answer
Show handle	@
The one scene (a real place people pass)	
The one or two main characters	
Guests who can rotate in	
First four episode ideas	
Who films and edits it	

Step 4: Give each handle its voice. For every handle, write one sentence: “This account talks to ___ about , *and sounds like* .”

Content idea list. Keep this open while you read reviews, search terms, Reddit, call-center notes and comments. Every repeated question is a post. Every complaint is an episode.

Idea	Source	Handle	Tier 1, show or clip

Appendix B: Faceless Content Shot List and Consent Checklist

Tier 1 shot ideas. Quiet, faceless and real. Natural sound or none.

- Hands doing the work: filling a pothole, salting a ramp, sorting mail, stamping a permit.
- The room at work, on mute: a conference room, a dispatch desk, a planning board.
- The view from the job: the cab of a plow at 4 a.m., a bridge inspection from the walkway.
- Before and after: the same spot, filmed from the same angle, a day apart.
- The quiet moment: the empty lot before the doors open, the lights coming on.

Show and check-in ideas (Chapter 4):

- The weekly 30-second episode on the same stretch of road with the same crew.
- A teaser still for the next episode.
- A funny moment or blooper.
- The best bit of a past episode.
- The morning stand-up, ending with “What’s your status this morning?”

Before you post, check every piece:

- ☐ No faces of residents, ever.
- ☐ Staff on camera agreed to it, in writing.
- ☐ No screens, documents, license plates or addresses readable in frame.
- ☐ Nothing that shows a security process or a restricted area.
- ☐ Your communications office has approved the handle and its voice.
- ☐ Counsel has approved the consent form and the creator agreement.
- ☐ Creators have a written agreement: what they can film, the privacy rules, partnership disclosure, who owns the handle, and how they’re paid (per 1,000 views, per 20 downloads, or free).
- ☐ Captions or on-screen text are accurate and plain.
- ☐ The post points somewhere: the main account, the app, or the handle’s store page.

Appendix C: Custom Store Page Planner

One row per handle. App Store Connect allows up to 70 custom product pages; Google Play has custom store listings. Build them in days 1–30 so every handle has its own front door before the posting starts.

Handle	Store page name	Preview images talk about	Promotional text	Link used in the handle's bio
@				
@				
@				
@				
@				
@				

Your default store page:

Field	What I use	Yours
Title	App name plus a keyword	
Subtitle	A phrase the audience already uses on social media	
First preview image	Problem, solution, trust signal	
Preview format	Horizontal previews with vertical screenshots inside	
Icon	Recognizable and official	
Languages	Spanish on every app, plus the top languages in your area. Same name, similar subtitle, different keywords, description and promo text	

Every 30 days, check each page: downloads and conversion for each custom page, which handle sends the most people, and whether the preview images still match that handle's best-performing posts. Update the creative to match what's winning.

Appendix D: Push and Deep Link Setup

The rule from Chapter 8: no blanket push. A message goes only to the people who picked that topic. Here's the shape of it on the three platforms I mentioned. Your developer or vendor will know the details; this is what to ask them for.

The pattern is the same everywhere:

1. List your topics. Use the content focus from your handle table: one route, one bridge, one school zone, one bus line.
2. Let the user pick topics inside the app, in plain words. Nothing is picked by default.
3. When they pick a topic, add them to it. When they drop it, remove them.
4. Send each message to one topic only.
5. Give them a one-tap way to see and change their topics.

Firebase. Firebase Cloud Messaging has topics built in. The app subscribes the user to a topic when they pick it and unsubscribes them when they drop it. Your team sends a message to that topic, and only those devices get it. A few functions are all it takes.

AWS. Amazon SNS uses topics the same way. Each interest is a topic, each device endpoint is subscribed when the user picks it, and a message is published to one topic.

Supabase. Keep a table of each user's chosen topics. When it's time to send, a function looks up who picked that topic and sends to only those devices through Apple's and Google's push services.

***Vendor:** Build interest-based topics from day one. Report how many people are on each topic and how many leave after each send. If people leave a topic after a message, that message was noise.*

Email and SMS follow the same rule: the user picks what they get and can change it any time.

How I set it up: Firebase Functions, push and Hosting

No code here. This is how one of my client apps does it, all on Firebase. Three pieces do the work: Hosting for the links, Functions for the thinking, and Cloud Messaging for the push. Where it helps, I've added what's happening under the hood in that app.

Push, from the app to Firebase and back:

1. **Connect Apple to Firebase.** Apple doesn't let anyone send to an iPhone directly. Apple's push service (APNs) does the delivery, so the APNs key from your Apple developer account goes into Firebase. Without it, iPhones get nothing.
2. **Google is already connected.** Android doesn't need that extra step. Firebase Cloud Messaging is Google's own push service.
3. **Save the device, not the person.** When someone allows notifications, the device checks in with Firebase. If you want, save only the device ID in Firestore, with the interests attached to it: this device wants alerts for I-64 and the Route 5 bus. No name, no email, no phone number, none of their personal info. That's all push needs, and it speeds up personalized push, because the system only has to look up which devices are attached to that interest.
4. **A Firebase Function decides who hears about it.** When something happens, like a new alert on a route or a reply to something the person posted, a Function picks it up, checks who's attached to that category or that thing, and sends the push to only those people.

Under the hood: that app runs two kinds of Functions. Some fire the moment something new is saved: a comment, a reply in a forum or group topic, a like, a request to join a group, or that request being approved. Others run on a schedule. Likes are batched, with a Function that runs every 10 minutes and sends one digest instead of a buzz for every single like. Another runs every hour to send re-engagement pushes to people who haven't been back.

5. **Every notification has a home in the app.** It's not just a buzz on the lock screen.

Under the hood: each notification is saved in Firestore with who it's for, what happened (a comment, a like, someone joining a group), what it's about (the type of item and its ID), who did it, and whether it's been seen. The app reads that list and marks each one seen when it's opened. The type and ID are what tell the app which screen to open.

6. **The tap comes back to you.** You can see what was opened, and whether it was worth sending.

Under the hood: every link the app opens logs an analytics event with the link type, the item's ID, and the referral code if there was one.

Links, through Hosting:

Every link goes through one place: Firebase Hosting. It's the central link for both the website and the app.

1. **Put it on your own domain.** Add your custom domain to Firebase with a subdomain just for links. For the DOT example, that's links.dot.gov. People trust a link with your agency's name

in it, and it works the same everywhere you post it.

2. **The page checks the device.** Code on your hosting, and on your main website, checks whether the person is on a phone or not. On a desktop, it shows one thing. On a phone, it shows something else, because that person is one tap away from the app.
3. **On a phone, it checks iPhone or Android.** Each gets its own call to action: the App Store button for iPhone, the Google Play button for Android. Nobody sees the wrong store.
4. **If they already have the app, they skip the page.** They go straight into the app, to the exact screen the link was about. On iPhone, the AASA file on your links subdomain is what tells the phone those links belong to your app. In that app, the AASA file lists the app's ID and the link paths that open it, starting with invite links under /referral/.

Under the hood: the app's link handler reads two things from every link: what kind of thing it is (a post, a story, a group, a forum topic, or a referral) and that item's ID. It opens that screen. If the person isn't ready yet, like someone opening the app for the first time, the app holds on to the link and opens it as soon as they are.

5. **Every share carries who shared it.** That's how I count downloads per creator for a deal like the one in Chapter 3.

Under the hood: every share button in the app builds a link with the item and the sharer's ID as the referral code. When someone opens a link with a code, the app saves the code on the device. When that person creates their account, the app checks that the code belongs to a real user and isn't their own, saves who referred them and when, adds one to the referrer's count, and logs a "referral applied" event.

6. **Every open is tracked.** Make sure UTM codes and such are on every link, so you can follow the path from post, to page, to store, to app, and see which handles, posts and people actually bring residents in.

Deep linking is part of the marketing

This isn't just plumbing. The link is the first thing people touch after your content, so it's part of the experience. Here's what each person should see with one link, links.dot.gov/route/i-64:

Who taps it	What they should see
Someone on a desktop	A page about the I-64 alerts, with a way to get the app on their phone
Someone on an iPhone without the app	The I-64 page with an App Store button
Someone on Android without the app	The I-64 page with a Google Play button
Someone who has the app	The I-64 screen inside the app, no page in between

Who taps it	What they should see
Someone who taps a push notification	The exact alert they were told about
A friend who got it from a resident	The same thing, and the resident gets credit for the share
A follower of a creator's handle	The same thing, and the creator gets credit for the download

Get any of these wrong and you lose people. A link that dumps someone on the home screen, or shows an iPhone user the Google Play button, is a leak in the loop.

Deferred deep linking

Deferred deep linking is for the person who doesn't have the app yet. They tap the link, download the app, open it for the first time, and still land on the screen the link was about instead of the home screen. It's the difference between "here's an app" and "here's the thing you wanted."

Google Play makes this fun. Google Play's install referrer passes the link's details through the download, so the app knows where the person came from and where they were going the first time it opens. Google Play Console also tells you when your deep links are broken.

Apple is a bit more complicated, but the job still gets done. There's no built-in pass-through like Google's, so you lean on the AASA file on your links subdomain to open the app directly, and on UTM codes and such added to every link and carried through to the App Store. That way you still know which post, handle or creator sent each download.

***Vendor:** Use one link subdomain on our domain (like links.dot.gov) through Firebase Hosting. Detect desktop versus mobile and iPhone versus Android, show the right call to action, and open the app directly when it's installed. Support Universal Links on iOS (with the AASA file on the links subdomain) and App Links on Android, put the same device and app check on the main website, add UTM codes to every link, deferred deep linking on both platforms, and a referral code on every link. Send push by user-chosen category through Firebase Functions, with a deep link in every notification. Report opens by link type, by referrer and by notification, and check Google Play Console for broken links.*

Appendix E: Glossary

Avatar (citizen avatar): One kind of resident with one set of needs, like a daily commuter, a truck driver or a parent. Each avatar gets its own handle.

Check-in account: A handle run like an agile team in public: the morning stand-up, the planning board, a question for the audience at the end.

Clippers (clip farmers): Creators who cut small pieces of content and point them back to a main account. Your niche handles and shows are your clip farm.

CTA (call to action): The one thing you ask people to do: download the app, turn on alerts for your route, report a pothole.

Custom product page: An extra App Store page with its own copy and preview images, up to 70 per app. Google Play calls them custom store listings.

Deep link: A link that opens a specific screen inside the app, not just the app's home screen. If the app isn't installed, it sends the person to the right store first.

Deferred deep link: A deep link that survives the download. Someone without the app taps it, installs the app, and lands on the screen the link was about the first time they open it.

Faceless content: Video of the work with no faces and little or no talking. The Tier 1 content.

Handle: A social media account. In this book, one handle talks to one avatar.

Head Nod content: Content people agree with and share without liking or commenting. Judge it by shares and sends.

In-app events: Cards on your App Store page and in search for something happening in the app. Google Play calls its version promotional content.

Interest-based push: Push notifications sent only to people who picked that topic.

Marketing loop: Awareness, consideration, preference, download, loyalty, advocacy, and back to awareness for someone new. It replaces the funnel.

Phased release: Rolling an App Store update out over seven days, 1% up to 100%, with the option to pause. Google Play calls it a staged rollout.

Pre-registration and pre-order: Letting people sign up for an app before it launches. Pre-registration is on Google Play; pre-order is on the App Store.

Product page optimization: App Store tests of up to three versions of your icon, screenshots and previews against your current page. Google Play calls them store listing experiments.

Localized store listing: Store content written for another language, with its own keywords, description and promotional text, not a straight translation of the English.

Promotional text: Up to 170 characters above your App Store description, changeable any time without a new version.

Proof first, then paid: Put paid media only behind content that already did well on its own.

Retention: People who come back and use the app again. A great leader cares about this most.

Show (Tier 2): A 30-second weekly series with one scene, one or two main characters and rotating guests.

Stability: The app works every time: no crashes, breaks or issues that stop people from finishing what they came to do. It comes before everything in this book.

Time to Fun: The time between opening the app and getting what you came for. Keep it as low as it can go.

UGC (user-generated content): Content made by creators or users instead of the agency.

Appendix F: Launch Checklist

Use it for a new app, a redesign or a big update. Cross out what doesn't apply.

90 to 60 days out

- ☐ Service areas, citizen avatars and handles mapped (Appendix A).
- ☐ Handles created with simple, searchable names, each with its voice written down.
- ☐ Creators found and studied for a week: who posts consistently and whose audience responds.
- ☐ A landing page for each audience.
- ☐ Tier 1 content posting: the work going into the app.
- ☐ Residents' words collected from reviews, search terms, Reddit, call-center notes and social media.
- ☐ Stability check started (Chapter 12).

60 to 30 days out

- ☐ Waitlist page live, linked from every handle.
- ☐ Beta open: TestFlight on iOS, a testing track on Google Play.
- ☐ Pre-registration (Google Play) or pre-order (App Store) turned on, for a new app.
- ☐ Front-line staff briefed on what the app does and what to say.
- ☐ First show planned: scene, main characters, first episodes.

30 days out to launch

- ☐ Default store page done: title, subtitle, preview images, icon.
- ☐ A custom product page for each handle (Appendix C).
- ☐ Launch-week posts written for every handle.
- ☐ Review replies drafted for the questions you can predict.
- ☐ Deep links and a Smart App Banner working.
- ☐ Featuring nomination sent in App Store Connect.
- ☐ Sign-offs: communications office, counsel, accessibility, privacy labels and data safety.
- ☐ Interest-based push topics set up, if you use push (Appendix D).

- ☐ Someone named to watch crashes, reviews and support every day of launch week.

Launch week

- ☐ Phased release (App Store) or staged rollout (Google Play) started.
- ☐ Waitlist told first.
- ☐ Every handle posts, each pointing to its own store page.
- ☐ Main account posts and picks up the best handle posts.
- ☐ Conversion rate checked first, then traffic sources and product page views.
- ☐ Crashes, reviews, Time to Fun and support volume checked daily.
- ☐ Every review answered.
- ☐ Rating prompt only after a success moment.
- ☐ No paid media yet.

30 days after

- ☐ Winners found on each handle; formats refined (Chapter 11).
- ☐ Paid media behind proven posts only.
- ☐ A product page test running.
- ☐ Promotional text and in-app events planned for the next update.
- ☐ Numbers reported to leadership: retention first, then adoption, loop health and public value.

About the Author

I'm Court Bluford, founder of Lissiland, an independent mobile product consultant based in Richmond, Virginia.

I've been building mobile apps since 2009 and have shipped more than 50 of them. Some for state government agencies up and down the East Coast. Some for the largest brands in gaming, travel and streaming. Some are my own. I like to think of myself as a mercenary in code. Jason Bourne, like the movies. (JSON Bourne, if you write code.) I come in, fix what's broken, and keep the client's name out of it.

Lissiland is me. I'm the developer, the marketer, the salesperson and the project manager. Everything in this book I've had to do myself: build the handles, work with the creators, write the store page, and answer the one-star review. My own apps include the Richmond airport app, Martha's Vineyard Ferries and the Martha's Vineyard bus app.

I also created the SEE Framework, my order of operations for government apps: Stability, then Engagement, then Expansion. This book goes deep on the last one. The full SEE Framework book is coming at a later date.

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Your agency built an app people need.
Now they have to find it, use it, and share it.
This book shows you how to get them there.

■ **Get the download.**

Niche social handles, real stories and store pages that turn citizens into users.

■ **Keep them.**

Fast time to value and respectful messaging that brings people back.

■ **Spread through their networks.**

Shows, creators and loyal users who carry your app further than any ad.

Beyond the Download is the Expansion piece of the SEE Framework. It isn't complicated. It takes effort and execution, and no new software.



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