

Smart Phones

An Overlooked Productivity Enhancer

Smart phones have been around for years now, but until recently, their role in the financial service arena was largely confined to traders and brokers. That's because historically, smart phones have not been able to deliver the functionality that PFP's required.

Over the last several years, the smart phone marketplace has undergone a revolutionary change. As a result of these changes, smart phones are becoming, for the first time, an essential productivity tool to the personal financial planner. Before we explain how planners can leverage the latest smart phone technologies, let's quickly review the changes that have elevated smart phones from an accessory to a necessity.

In order for advisors to get a real benefit from smart phones, four conditions had to be met. First, the hardware needed to improve. With the introduction of the iPhone, the Google phone and new models from Blackberry and Palm, this is clearly happening. The devices themselves are more functional, and the resolution of the screens has noticeably improved. Second, the networks needed to improve. Again, this has happened. With the introduction of 3G networks, smart phone users are getting true broadband speeds, with further improvements expected soon. Third, the software had to improve. With the introduction of the Apple app store and its growing number of imitators, the smart phone application business is a real growth industry. In addition, the phone operating software from almost all vendors is breaking new ground in usability and functionality. Finally, competitive pricing was necessary, and this has clearly happened as well, with phones and data plans selling at affordable prices. In short, all of the ingredients are in place to promote the smart phone from a fashion accessory to an essential productivity tool. Let's now examine a few ways PFP's can increase productivity through the use of a smart phone.

Today's latest models come pre-loaded with a good deal of functionality. Most include GPS, voice to text, text to voice, cameras, and the ability to play (and in some cases record) video. These features allow the PFP to leverage time in numerous ways. For example, if you visit a client in their office across town, and the meeting wraps up early, you can use the GPS function to map the office locations of other nearby clients. This allows you to perhaps pay a quick visit to a second client, thereby getting more from your cross town trip.

PFP's consistently cite time management as one of their top three challenges. With to-do lists, address books, calendaring capabilities, and connectivity to your office and or online time management tools, smart phones can help you stay on task. You can also field appointment requests, respond to staff queries, and handle other tasks no matter where you are. Smart phones also allow you to perform tasks more efficiently. For example, with fulfillment software, some PFP's can field client requests for information no matter where they are, and have a server in their office dispatch the requesting information to the client, all with a few clicks of the smart phone.

Another measurable benefit of smart phones is their ability to help you connect more often with clients. Multiple studies have shown that the best way to retain clients is to maintain frequent contact with them through multiple channels. Smart phones allow you to communicate with clients by phone, email, social networking sites and the Internet in a matter of minutes, no matter where you are. By making use of the smart phone to increase client touches, you increase the odds of retaining them as clients.

User downloadable third party applications, such as the Apple App Store, have greatly expanded the functionality of smart phones. There are apps that allow you to schedule travel, check flight status, obtain news and weather reports. There are even apps to help you locate the best gasoline prices in your vicinity.

For those of you who still rely on the HP-12C calculator, there's an iPhone app for that. You can load a full version of the HP-12C onto your iPhone (or iPod Touch) for just \$14.99. The Android Marketplace for the G1 Google Phone offers Mobile Financial Calculator which can perform many, but not all of the calculations that the HP-12C can. Many other specialized financial calculators are available for download for little or no fee.

Collecting business cards from contacts and prospects is "so yesterday". With an application such as CardSnap for iPhone, you simply take a picture of the card with your phone. The picture is then submitted to a server for processing, after which you can load the information into your address book. No lost cards; not data entry. Instant productivity!

Smart phones are usually sold based upon the "bells and whistles", but from a productivity standpoint, there are two key benefits to using a smart phone. The first is capitalizing on small units of time. Small bits of valuable time often get wasted because the PFP is not in a position to capitalize on them; smart phones allow PFP's to capitalize on them. For example, if you are waiting to catch a plane, and you have ten minutes before boarding, it is not worth the effort of booting your laptop if it takes four minutes to start and three more minutes to power down. With a smart phone, however, you can be immediately productive. You can check email, return phone calls, check the web for important news, and much more. If you are commuting to work by bus or train, it may not always be possible to open a laptop, but you can work from your phone wherever you are. If you are commuting, or working out on the exercise bike, you can take an audio or video training class to fulfill your CE requirements.

Saving five to fifteen minutes here and there may not sound like much, but if you can do it three times per day, and you project the times savings out at your hourly rate over the course of a year, the return is substantial.

Most of the functionality we've discussed above falls into this theme of capturing small units of time and using them productively. The second key benefit of using smart phones is their ability to extend the desktop. What we are really talking about here is some form of mobile integration. The idea is to make the tools you use on your computer in the office available to you on your smart phone. While we are not suggesting that every function on every program is portable to a mobility device today, enough functionality is portable to have a real impact on productivity.

A number of providers within the industry have already released or are planning to release mobile applications or applications specifically for the iPhone. Custodians and B/D's including Commonwealth Financial, Fidelity and Pershing, have offered access through mobile phone web browsers for some time. More recently, firms that include eMoney, Interactive Advisory Software (IAS), Morningstar, and Redtail have released iPhone applications. Others are sure to follow suit. The advantage of this new generation of mobile applications is that it allows users to seamlessly integrate their mobile activities within their existing workflows, thereby saving time and avoiding duplication.

If you do not have a smart phone, or if you have one but are not using it effectively, you are missing out on an opportunity to produce more with less effort. Many PFP's are already enjoying the benefits that the latest mobile technology has to offer. Isn't it time that you joined them?