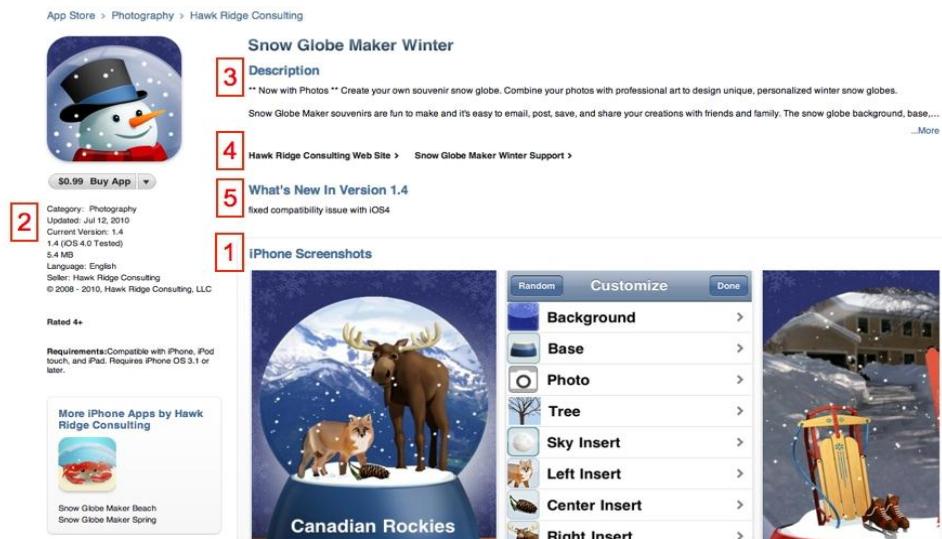


Should You Buy That App? Five Tips For Decoding an iTunes App Listing

by MOMS WITH APPS on SEPTEMBER 13, 2010

If you're buying iPhone apps based on a quick look at their iTunes reviews, you're missing a lot of the story. Here are 5 ways to evaluate whether that app is worth buying, from an app developer who sees the iTunes listing from the other side.



1. **Check the screenshots** because pictures often tell more than words. App vendors can only display 5 images with the app listing, and it's prime real estate. If a vendor only includes one screen shot, or devotes two spots to pictures of the icon and splash screen, the app is either very simple or could be hiding a problem UI. Look for clear images of the app in action, or of output you would expect to create with the app.
2. **Check the date**. Apple displays the date the app was released or last updated under the app icon. If the app was released or last updated in 2008, it isn't taking advantage of iPhone updates and isn't responding to new competition. Maybe the app is so perfect it hasn't needed an update in over a year, or maybe the developer has moved on to other things.
3. **Read the description**. Click "More..." to read the app description beyond the two lines Apple displays. Most vendors include a list of key features so you'll know more about what you're paying for.
4. **Try the links**. App vendors can provide two links: one for the vendor website and one for the app support page. Many vendors use the same landing page for both, which is fine as long as it's clear how to get support for the app. A surprising number of apps link to pages that are dead (suggesting the vendor isn't supporting the app), or redirect you to a page that provides no help. The bottom line is, you want to be able to get help if you have an issue. Vendor web sites often include demo videos which are a great way to evaluate an app before you buy.
5. **Read the What's New list**. If the app has been updated, you'll see a summary of what's in the new version just above the screenshots. Few products do everything you want them to on day one. Most dedicated app vendors will have a series of features they want to release, and they'll bring them out over time. They also might need to improve app stability or usability. If an app is over 6 months old, check to see if it has been updated with new features and fixes.

Okay, now **check the ratings**, but keep in mind that iTunes star ratings and written reviews are basically anonymous. Positive ratings can be misleading and some companies even sell 5-star reviews to desperate app vendors. Negative reviews can be vague or inaccurate, and there is no way for an app vendor to respond in iTunes or contact the customer to make things right. Take time to read some of the written reviews and look for detailed feedback. Treat a string of short "best app ever" comments with a little suspicion. Ratings can provide valuable information, but don't let them be the only factor you consider.

A final tip—remember that most apps are only a dollar or two, so if you make a bad choice it has about the same financial impact as a house coffee at Starbucks. If you have any feedback or suggestions about the apps you purchase, take a moment to email the developer. Most developers are very interested in hearing what their customers think directly, and you may even earn a promo code for a future app.