

# How are your business programs adapting admissions content to meet today's mobile demands?

## Surveying the Mobile Habits of MBA Applicants

### Introduction: Mobile Is Even More Important Than You Think

Although graduate business schools understand that the use of mobile devices among MBA applicants has grown rapidly over the last few years, the growth has actually been swifter than many have expected. In short, the ground has shifted dramatically - with the device preferences of business school applicants and their information gathering habits changing in significant ways. Smartphone ownership is now ubiquitous; 96 percent of applicants own a smartphone and about 78 percent report that they would download a mobile app for a school. As such, schools would do well to design their digital marketing materials for the mobile environment.



In parallel with this shift, we have seen the evolution of social media and the widespread use of Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn among applicants. A business school's social media strategy is critical because it is a means of having a presence in the most popular mobile apps, especially as social media—whether accessed via mobile device or PC—has become a primary source of news and information.

### Project Background

In late 2014, the Graduate Management Admissions Council® (GMAC®) partnered with Southwark Consulting to undertake a survey exploring the information consumption habits of MBA applicants, and how those habits are being impacted by the use of mobile devices and social media. We surveyed 743 individuals from around the world who had registered on mba.com and asked them questions about

their use of smartphones, social media, and how these tools factored into their research during the MBA application process.

The results are clear: MBA candidates have mobile devices and use them to the exclusion of using traditional media, such as print, television and radio, for gathering news and information. These users are socially engaged and social media is a principle source of news, with LinkedIn being particularly popular among this audience.

This is useful for schools in terms of developing marketing strategies, not only for developing websites, social and mobile strategies, but also for allocating broader advertising budgets, where more dollars might shift to digital channels from traditional media.

## Survey Group

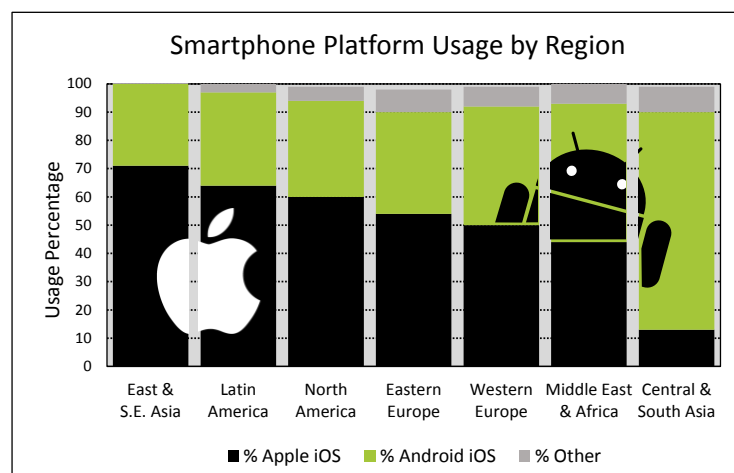
The survey group was explicitly designed to draw responses from MBA applicants across the globe. Respondents by region were as follows:

<b>Total Worldwide</b>	<b>743</b>
<b>-Asia Pacific</b>	<b>203</b>
<b>-Europe, Africa, Middle East</b>	<b>296</b>
<b>-North &amp; Latin America</b>	<b>244</b>

## Mobile Trends

The smartphone is ubiquitous with this audience; 96 percent of survey respondents own a smartphone.

Operating systems for smartphones in the survey group are split between Android (42%) and Apple's iOS (52%), with very few candidates reporting use of Blackberry and Windows Mobile. In the Middle East, Africa, Central and South Asia (including India), Android is the dominant platform. Meanwhile, Apple's iOS is the most prevalent operating system in East and Southeast Asia (including China), North America, Latin America and Eastern Europe.



Participants endorsed frequent use of their smartphones throughout the day, and 64 percent of respondents reported use of their device for more than two hours a day. It is clear that for schools to engage with this audience, a strategy for mobile is necessary.

In terms of what this group is doing on their smartphone, 60 percent of their time is spent in mobile apps, as opposed to browsing the web (40%). The majority of the audience has more than 30 Apps on their smartphone, but the number of apps used on a daily basis is only about eight.

The question for schools regarding apps is twofold: (1) whether to design an app for this audience, and (2) how to establish a presence in existing apps that are already accessed on a frequent basis. Social media apps fall into this category.

Seventy-eight percent of the audience said that they would download an app for a school that they are interested in if it included the following features:

- application deadlines
- instructions and tuition fees
- program offerings
- notifications of school events
- school news
- career statistics as well as a class profile
- access to alumni and students
- the application itself
- access to application status updates.

Thus, an app designed specifically for the admissions process, rather than a school-wide app designed to target broader constituents of the university, would be necessary to capture this audience's attention.

If a school does choose to design an app specifically for this audience, it faces two marketing challenges: how to get their audience to download the app (i.e. to make it one of the 30 apps on their phone), and how to get the app adopted for frequent usage (i.e. to become one of the 8 apps that are used frequently). This will be challenging, as the feedback from survey respondents on existing mobile applications from schools was less than positive. When candidates were asked to report on standout mobile apps or mobile web sites from business schools, they often shared comments along the following lines:

*"Don't particularly remember anything exceptional as such. All seem similar and standard (or sub-standard) as far as accessibility, design and user layout is concerned."*

*"None in particular has caught my attention."*

*“Unfortunately none”*

While a handful of schools’ names come up from time to time (such as the Stanford Graduate School of Business and Harvard Business School), it became clear from survey responses that candidates generally do not think very highly of school apps or mobile sites.

Regardless of the decision about whether to design an app, it is also important to make sure the school’s website is optimized for mobile access. Browsing the web from a mobile device accounts for 40 percent of activity on the phone, and this audience spends as much time accessing the internet via a mobile device as they do via PC.

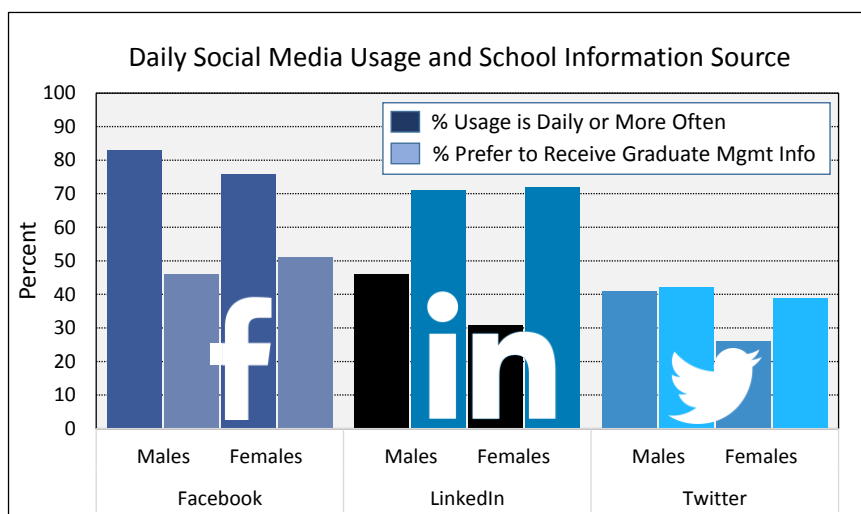
Responsive design is the approach most often used to make sure that a site designed for a PC responds appropriately when accessed by a mobile device. This approach will help to enhance both audience engagement and search visibility, as Google recently adjusted its mobile search algorithm to penalize sites that are not optimized for mobile viewing.

It is also important to note that while the smartphone is ubiquitous with this audience, ownership of a tablet is only around 50 percent, with fewer than 30 percent of tablet owners using these devices for more than 2 hours a day. Because the user experience on a tablet is relatively similar to that of a PC, reflected in the greater web browsing activity on a tablet versus a smartphone (51% versus 40%), it likely makes sense for schools to focus on the smaller screen of the smartphone when making mobile design decisions.

## Social Media Trends

In terms of social media usage, Facebook is dominant among this audience; 87 percent are active on Facebook. Eighty-one percent use Facebook on a daily basis, with 45 percent using Facebook multiple times a day. Facebook is clearly the most engaging platform for this population, which is not surprising given the site’s the wide reach in the general population.

What is very interesting, however, is that LinkedIn is the second most popular social network for this group, with an 82 percent reach but less frequent access (40% use LinkedIn on a daily basis). When asked where they would be prefer to receive



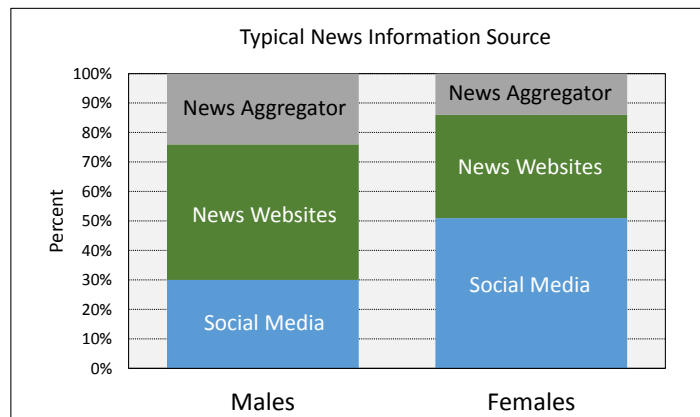
information about Graduate Management Education on social media, LinkedIn was endorsed more frequently than Facebook (72% versus 47%). The fact that LinkedIn is preferred is perhaps not surprising given the professional focus of the network, but it does present an opportunity for schools. At present, members of this audience ‘follow’ schools at about the same rate (55 percent) on both networks. This suggests that there is an opportunity for schools to better engage their audiences by developing their LinkedIn strategies.

Twitter was the third-most important network, but fell significantly behind both LinkedIn and Facebook in reach, engagement, and appeal as a source of information about Graduate Management Education.

Surprisingly, even the least “mobile” prospects, meaning potential applicants who do not have a smartphone or who use a smartphone or tablet less than an hour a day, are using Facebook and LinkedIn at comparable rates (75-85%) to those who are better connected with mobile technology. However, the less connected group is less likely than heavier smartphone users to have Twitter accounts (31% vs. 55%).

## News & Information Gathering

With respect to gathering news via the internet, 87 percent of respondents said that they used a PC to do so at least once a day, with 84 percent reporting daily use of a mobile device for this purpose. Meanwhile, 26 percent reported daily use of print media, 28 percent for radio, and 38 percent for television. It is clear that the internet is a primary source of news for this community—even if some of the news content is still sourced from media outlets that also offer print, radio or television. This has implications for allocating advertising budgets, and reinforces the importance of a strong internet, social and mobile strategy.



In terms of the internet, sharing news and information about schools in the social space becomes more important as audiences further rely on social media as a primary source of online news and information. Social media was ranked the most important source of news by 38 percent of respondents, only slightly behind news sites favored by 41 percent of survey participants. Only 20 percent view news aggregator sites, like Google News, as their most important news source. Clearly, it is important that information be shared through social channels, but it is also important to stimulate sharing among followers in order to increase the reach of content that is pushed through social media. What makes developing a social

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strategy more important is that many prospective MBA students will be consuming their social media content via their smartphone, through apps. This becomes a means for schools to be ever-present – even outside official apps and mobile sites.

## Demographic Trends

When mobile habits are explored separately by gender, age, and world region, some interesting differences emerge:

- Women are more closely tied to their smartphones: 46 percent of female respondents reported using their smartphones 3 or more hours per day, compared with only 34 percent for male participants. Similarly, men are more likely than women to spend less than 2 hours per day using their smartphones (40% vs. 27%).
- While men and women use the various social media platforms at about equal rates, women are much more likely (51% vs. 30% for men) to rank social media as their #1 news source.
- Prospects in the Middle East, Africa, and East/South East Asia are using their mobile technology for more hours per day than are those in other regions of the world. Half report using their smartphones for three hours per day or more. One-quarter of prospects in these regions also report using their tablets three or more hours per day. This could be related to the fact that these markets are truly ‘mobile first’ in that smartphones were the first readily available, affordable technology for getting online.
- In contrast, smartphone usage is much lower in Eastern and Western Europe. Almost half of prospects from these regions (49% and 48%, respectively), report using their smartphones for less than 2 hours per day.
- The most popular social media sites for the worldwide sample are used markedly less by those in East and South East Asia. Only 63 percent of prospects in this region use Facebook, 36 percent use Twitter, and 51 percent use LinkedIn. In these regions, channels like WeChat, WhatsApp, QQ, RenRen, and other localized social media outlets are clearly responsible for this trend, though it is important to remember that applicants in countries like China face meaningful barriers to accessing Facebook and other popular platforms.
- The youngest prospects, those 22 years old or younger, have mobile habits that differ from the older cohort. Half use their smartphone for 3 or more hours per day (compared to only about one-third of the older group). They also rank social media as their #1 source of news more often (46% vs. 36%). These trends are critical to understanding the next wave of applicants.
- Almost one-quarter of the youngest group reports never using the television to access news, and 48 percent report never using the radio for this purpose.

- The youngest group uses Instagram in large numbers (85% vs. 47%). In fact, half of the younger group report using Instagram once a day or more, which exceeds their frequency of using of LinkedIn or Twitter.

## Marketing Framework

With all this data at hand, it is important to design a marketing strategy that helps move a potential audience through the admissions funnel appropriately. Tactics that raise awareness of a program and its offerings will need to be driven through channels that engage those that are already connected via social media while also spreading awareness to those who are not yet connected to the business school ecosystem. A mobile web site will also be important at the top end of the funnel so as to ensure that new prospective applicants can easily get the information they are seeking from your institution.

A mobile app, on the other hand, would be more appropriately targeted to those already engaged – to deepen that engagement as candidates prepare to apply and navigate the application process.

## Conclusion

Several reports have established that media habits are changing; this survey confirms that these trends hold among the specific audience of those considering a Graduate Management Education.

Opportunities for schools to connect with this audience have never been more apparent, using real connections via social media and mobile devices, rather than indirect connections via traditional marketing (print media, viewbooks, etc.). That being said, it does seem that as an industry, graduate management programs need to recognize that we are in the midst of change and stay nimble in developing appropriate marketing strategies to engage this audience. With mobile-leaning habits appearing to be even more pronounced among the younger segment of our participant pool, the importance of responsive marketing strategies will only increase with time.

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