Chapter 11

Apps You Can (and Cannot) Build

Sadly, we realized early on in writing this book that we’d need a chapter about all the rules that attend the use of the Facebook and Twitter APIs. Back in 2009, when these apps were exploding in popularity, social APIs were used with relative abandon. The platform makers—and that includes Facebook and Twitter—weren’t sure how smartphones were going to change the way people used their tools.

Now that some time has passed, Facebook and Twitter have begun restricting the ways in which you can use their APIs.

In fairness, Facebook’s platform policies are sensible and give developers wide latitude. Twitter, on the other hand, is often accused of being more manipulative (to put it diplomatically) about how people use their code.

While we, the authors, would certainly prefer complete freedom to use these APIs however we want, it’s important to acknowledge that a brand like Twitter has a reputation to uphold, and (like any company) it is terrified of someone dragging it through the mud or confusing consumers about what Twitter is for.

Treat this section as a filter for your app ideas. If you already have an app that you’re adding Twitter or Facebook functionality to, then you’ll still want to skim this chapter to make sure none of your app’s visual or interactive elements attract any negative attention from the Twitter and Facebook platforms.

After all, the only thing worse than having to obey rules is having to go back and redo your work to comply with them.

Twitter: No Clients Allowed

In March 2011, Twitter platform team member Ryan Sarver (@rsarver) posted a missive to its developer group. In this post, Sarver declared new Twitter fiats meant to corral what and how developers build. You can read his post at this URL:
https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/twitter-development-talk/yCzVnHqHIWo/discussion

We won’t bother reproducing the note in full, but we’ll highlight some areas where the changes in policy have been most acute. These also tend to be areas that developers new to the platform aren’t aware of. The main points were as follows:

- Twitter has gotten exceedingly popular since its developer terms were first written.

- The more mainstream the service, the more consistent the UI and UX must be; otherwise, Twitter suffers what is known in the business as *brand dilution*.

- The UI and UX in the official Twitter apps are best, as indicated by their immense popularity compared to that of third-party Twitter apps.

- As a result, Twitter is slowly cracking down on the creation of Twitter clients that only reproduce Twitter functionality (and don’t add some other kind of value). It’s suggestions for value-added Twitter apps include publishing tools (such as SocialFlow), curation tools (such as Sulia), and data products (such as Klout). Other opportunities include social CRM clients like HootSuite; as well as other unique services like Foursquare, Instagram, and Quora.

In summary: You can still develop freely with the Twitter API. But from now on, you’ll have to be more creative about the way your app uses the service. Simply reproducing the Twitter app with a different design or interaction will earn you a scolding from the Twitter team email (and possibly loss of access to the Twitter API).

The Lowdown on the Twitter Terms of Service

When Twitter posted the note just described, it also disseminated a revised Terms of Service that provided more specificity on the changes described in that post. Again, we won’t reproduce them in full here, but there are certain areas you should be particularly aware of.

**NOTE:** The best case scenario is that you will create an app that is wildly popular. If your app ever needs more than 5 million user tokens, you will need to contact Twitter directly about access to the Twitter API.

You can find the complete Twitter Terms of Service here:

http://dev.twitter.com/pages/api_terms