In the last chapter, you learned how to submit your application to the Android Market. Assuming you are following these chapters closely, your first application should now be available on the market for download by Android users everywhere. Take some time to celebrate this! No doubt you have worked quite hard to get this far.

Don’t celebrate too hard, though. As much as you might want to rest on your laurels and wait for profits to roll in, that would be most unwise. Now that you have spent a great amount of time preparing for your application to go live, you still need to do the work so it is marketed to as many Android users as possible.

Chapters 4 and 8 discussed preparing for this day. Tasks such as drawing up a list of media people, writing press releases, making friends and followers on social networks, and so on are like sowing the seeds for your application. Now that your application is live, the launch day marks the time to reap the harvest. Just as farmers don’t sleep during harvest time, these precious first days of your application’s launch are a time to work.

I’m going to be focusing this chapter on your application’s specific time of harvest. Chapter 11 will focus on how to keep marketing your application for many years afterward.

Deciding Whether to Have a Beta-Testing Phase

It is exciting to be an Android developer and have an application out on the market. That means that your work is there, and anyone can have access to it. Even though you have this great sense of accomplishment, and want to make certain that you are capitalizing on your investment, you might want to hold off on marketing for a while.

I know that is tough to do, when all you want to do is market this thing so you can get the greatest amount of profits as possible. However, remember what I said before about how bad reviews can make or break an application on the Android Market? Do you really want your application be plagued by bad reviews? Of course the answer is no, so I have to recommend the old cliché, “When in doubt, don’t.” Instead of emphasizing marketing your application, you might want to spend some time determining whether or not it works as well as you and the user expect it to.

When I created my first application, I did the work, had the frustration, and was anxious to get my application downloaded by as many Android users as I could. I live in a college town, and I created an application to be used by the locals there. A majority of my target audience were students at the nearby universities, and I wanted to get my application out on the market before the students arrived for the fall semester. I actually got the application out on the market before the students got back, effectively meeting my deadline.

I probably should have marketed the heck out of it with a flier campaign, but I deliberately held back. The reason why is that I wanted to see how well the application worked in the real world. Therefore, I found several friends who are Android users, and I asked them to try out the application.
As it turns out, it was right for me to hesitate, as I learned several things from this beta-testing phase. For example, I wanted to see if my app would work on multiple Android devices. I also wanted to know if all of those features that I spent so much time on were even usable.

For example, I wanted one of my features to be able to download MP4 video files and MP3 audio files. It turns out the method that I was using would have worked perfectly on a web browser for a computer, but fell flat when it came to doing it on an Android application. Considering that I boasted that this audio/video downloading was one of the application’s main features, I realized that more work would have to be done.

Of course, I could have discovered that for myself in the early development phase of my application building. The whole reason that you do beta testing is to discover the things that you haven’t thought about when it comes to your application. When word about my application got out, I received some suggestions for features that seemed obvious, after I heard them. I began to wonder why I didn’t think of them myself. As developers, we live in a world where we can only see so far, and it often takes someone on the outside to figure out what is really up.

Sometimes it is the users who know the least about the development process that give us the best advice. Developers that know the most about applications can use any Android program on instinct alone, and they might not realize how a typical Android user might view your application.

Since beta testers are doing you a favor and using their valuable time to go over your application, you should take the time to compensate them for their efforts. I realize that as a first-time developer you may be on a small budget, but you should at least let your beta testers have a free copy of your application, or something else they consider valuable. Find out some way that you can help them, as they are helping you!

In the case that I explained, I used people that I knew to be beta testers. However, this doesn’t always have to be the case. In fact, it is recommended that you use people that you don’t know to test out your application. The point of a beta test is to be as anonymous and impersonal as possible so you will find the viewpoint of the average Android user. You can put out a request for a beta tester on your web site’s blog, not to mention your social networks on Twitter and Facebook.

You can also put out a free version of your application into the market, with a clear label of “beta” on it. Once it has gone through its beta-testing phase, you can change the name, remove the beta, and kill the app. Any negative comments will be completely expunged, and you can start clean and resubmit the application with all the changes.

After I had my group of beta testers try out my application, they showed me what was and wasn’t working on my application. This enabled me to go back and make some solid improvements to the application, which increased its functionality and made it more user-friendly.

In short, I recommend a beta-test phase for your application, especially if it is your first. How long you decide to go through this phase is up to you; some applications go through beta for months before their official release.

For example, LinkedIn, the professional network mentioned earlier in this book, has an official application for Android (see Figure 10-1). The beta version was released in December of 2010, but the official version didn’t get official release until April 2011. Even though most people wanted an official LinkedIn application in December of 2009, it is good that the company went through the beta phase in order to find out exactly what worked and what did not work on its mobile version.

LinkedIn has over 1 million downloads as of August 2011. If it hadn’t gone through its testing phase, it might have had fewer, as many users would have rejected it due to problems, regardless of whether it had the LinkedIn brand.