

The NHS COVID-19 App – Making it More Engaging

A Blog Comment by Steve Clark

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Introduction

Following on from my essay “*The NHS COVID-19 App, Separating Fact from Fiction*”, which focussed mainly on the technical challenges and understanding the privacy risks, this article looks more at engagement with the App, and quite simply is it engaging enough to keep people using it?

Monitoring social media here on the Isle of Wight, whilst there has been a lot positive said about the App, where there has been dissent much of the early concerns about privacy have given way to disinterest and boredom with a degree of anecdotal evidence to suggest some people are deleting the App because it doesn’t appear to be doing anything, and others because they are becoming confused by the messages it is sending and think it “isn’t working” properly.

As a lifelong technologist who has worked delivering customer facing software, products and services and with over 30 years with a career that spans computer games, multimedia and the growth of the web, e-commerce, interactive TV, mobile and even e-gambling, I’ve been at the leading edge of Customer Usability and User Experience and I’m certainly not convinced this App is engaging enough.

OK it doesn’t need to be engaging in the traditional sense but we are being told that to be truly successful as part of the wider track and trace programme the App needs to be installed AND used at all times by 60%+ of the adult population.

Any marketer will tell you the same thing which is customer acquisition is part of the battle but retention is key to winning the war. So should the App be using some of the techniques used by more commercial offerings?

Installation process

The App downloads and installs easily enough on phones with which it is compatible but at present we have only very broad brush compatibility information (IOS 11 and later/Android version 8 and later) and yet social media reports countless instances of phones that should be able to run it being unable to do so. At the time of writing there appears to be no direct help for these users other than a typical response from other interested individuals (myself included) suggesting they report the problem on the Trial’s feedback URL at <https://faq.covid19.nhs.uk/create-case/>.

However buried away on the pages supporting the App there is now a growing list of phones where compatibility has been tested.

<https://faq.covid19.nhs.uk/category/?id=CAT-01005>.

What is missing through at this stage is an obvious “customer services” route to getting this information. Businesses wanting to make money from their customers using an app invest in a level of customer service that balances the reward with the expense of providing the support – it may be that the level of support deemed required is for people like me to comment usefully on social media, but we live in an era where people ask questions to Facebook groups that can easily be Googled so surely this is an indicator that for large swathes of the population more handholding is required?

My recommendation is that at least a modicum of customer support access should be implemented as part of the national rollout (related to the technology not the wider track and trace operation), perhaps in the form of Social Media support focussed on Facebook and Twitter, as well as access to chat support on the web site.

Using The App

When you have installed the App and it is running, near the top of its main page is a little circle with a tick in it and a message saying the App is working properly.

This is great for a prototype but it isn't really “exciting” or engaging, and a common comment on social media is to question whether the App really is working properly.

The next thing is that there is no clear status on this page. Everything there is very sensible – a message relating to your status which in my case has said “Follow the current advice to stop the spread of coronavirus” and a link to “read the current advice” and a question as to “How are you feeling today?” which enables you to put in symptoms if you feel unwell.

OK so the App is probably working but it's really all a bit boring. It's also clear from social media that in the first stages of alert the output is not convincing enough: “It says I've been in contact with someone with symptoms but the advice it is giving me is the same as I've always been following....so the App isn't working”...and then a lengthy set of conflicting opinions ensues typically as to whether to follow the advice linked or to fully self isolate”.

Go much further and the remainder of the page then disappears below the “fold” (ie requires a scroll down) – which is still a classic “no no” in usability design especially for critical information.

So could we improve the App and increase engagement at the same time? Here are some suggestions – a lot of these are really subtle as they are arguably “topologically equivalent” to what is already there but presentation really counts a lot of the time. First some “quick wins”:

1. Jazz up the “App is working properly message”. Make it more exciting with a bluetooth symbol pulsating radar pulses and a time and datestamp. Really minor thing but graphics count.
2. Add in alongside it a graphical depiction of the COVID “DEFCON” status. Gives a purpose for using and checking on the App if you get bored of or don’t trust its primary purpose. Add the facility for push notifications to notify a change.
3. Target the remainder of the page at “Your status”. Graphically with traffic lights. Have your status (based on your symptom reporting and COVID test status) and a count of other people the App has pinged (in the last 28 days). Use Amber and Red for other contacts that have reported symptoms or even tested positive. This shows it is working. Now put in the advice message as it can now be clear now that this message relates to the status (and is less likely to be confused as the current one can be as just a web link to generic advice).
4. A comment has been confusion after an apparent status change leading to no change in advice. So it should be made clearer that if someone else has symptoms (or even if they test positive), the advice to the App user may not actually change (unless they too get symptoms).

Then longer term:

5. Under how are you feeling today, If you are asking “how are you feeling today?” If you are going to say that don’t allow someone just to say they have symptoms, but also allow them to say they feel fine (with small print and/or feedback to say they don’t have to do that every day), but with feedback to say that “were pleased you feel fine, don’t forget to tell us how you are feeling on a regular basis and especially if you have symptoms” (doesn’t even matter if you don’t use the feeling fine information). (Otherwise change the message to be what you mean – “do you have symptoms?”)
6. Include a test facility to let people prove to themselves the App works and is working. If you put two phones into test mode then they should literally “ping” each other. This should require both phones to be in test mode and test mode should auto-expire after a short interval.

Linking off to the web

The App links off to the web right off of the dominant message on the page and you are then in “uncontrolled territory” and less technical users may not even realise they have left the App. In fact as I write this, there are three links out of the App on its main page. All of the fundamental messaging should be replicated into the App NOT provided via links.

Make the App count in the public consciousness

Report App download, usage and contact stats in the regular Daily Briefings; also gives a chance to reaffirm the privacy protection.

Secondly where the App (being Centralised) has enabled the tracing of asymptomatic carriers.

If appropriate include these as a subset of the wider track and trace programme so a relationship can be seen as to benefits from the App reaffirming it should be downloaded, retained and used.

Summary

We live in a world where people look for dynamic feedback in everything they use and quick fault resolution otherwise they quickly lose interest.

My view is that the support in getting going with the App in scenarios other than in a straightforward “download and go” has been lacking, the user experience is poor and that the level of engagement engendered by the App is low.

This is fine at the trial stage and it’s easy to argue that an App that is a “tool” doesn’t have to have “bells and whistles” but for a “product” that to be successful needs as many people to use it as possible, even small and subtle changes such as the ones suggested could significantly increase the download rate and, even more importantly over time, the retention rate of the App.

If the App is core to the wider track and trace programme it should be included in the Daily Briefing stats.

It may well be the NHSX team are already doing some of the things listed in here but if so they aren’t really alluding to it publicly. I am aware of all the obvious arguments for NOT doing some of the ideas here and have counter arguments to most of them if NHSX or anyone else for that matter wants to engage!