

Build vs. Buy: Identifying the Optimal Route to Mobile-Enabling Your Photo Products



The Photo Product Market Today



Consumer demand for personalised photo products is booming. The global market for photo-related purchases such as prints, photo merchandise, calendars and photo books is predicted to reach **US\$27,335.3 Million by 2027***. This demand is driven significantly by two factors: the massive growth of smartphone apps that allow photo capture and sharing, and the continued strength of e-commerce, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This market provides emotional photo products that are attractive to consumers but also increasingly accessible to a wide variety of retailers across an equally wide product range. From established global brands to niche e-commerce vendors, technology allows retailers to add photo products to their portfolios more easily than ever before.

To make the most of the opportunity, photo-related purchases need to be driven directly from the mobile device — the place where most photos are now captured. But even the simplest photo product offering requires multiple images to be selected, cropped, rotated and refined before print. Photo books, which deliver a personalised and emotional offering to customers, require layout, editing and multi-page configuration. Creating the perfect environment for photo product selection and design that is mobile-friendly and integrated into the retailer's existing e-commerce platform is a considerable task.

So, retailers looking to enhance their share of customers' wallets with emotional photo products have a decision to make.

Do they build their own mobile photo editing and product creation software tools?

Or buy an off-the-shelf app?

*<https://www.theinsightpartners.com/reports/photo-printing-market>



Why Photo Products?

If COVID-19 taught us anything, it is that our family and friends are incredibly important to us all. During the pandemic, Google saw a **700% increase in “long-distance miss-you quotes”¹** and an **80% increase in searches for “online gift”**. Online retailers are also seeing this trend and are looking to expand their portfolio with products that offer a personalised aspect that can be tailored and delivered remotely. Photo products fit this need perfectly.

Any e-commerce vendor or physical retailer looking to add photo products to their portfolio can see a series of benefits:

- Additional low-risk revenue streams
- Increased brand and customer loyalty
- Greater share of the customer wallet
- Differentiation from competitors
- Provision of premium products and services

Simple photo prints and photo-related merchandise such as mugs and t-shirts are now commonplace. But complex products such as wall art, calendars and photo books are still considered premium offerings. These premium products offer the potential for significant upsell opportunities and are typically high-margin products — but they come at a cost, requiring premium software to design and configure.

¹ <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/intl/en-gb/consumer-insights/consumer-trends/gift-giving-during-pandemic/>





The Mobile Explosion

The desire for photo products has been driven in part by our enforced remoteness over the past year or so, but the ease at which we can create high-quality images from our mobile devices is equally important.

Ever since Apple introduced the iPhone in 2007, the use of mobile devices as a vehicle to take photos has skyrocketed. In 2020, an estimated 1.43 trillion photos were taken², with over 90% captured on a mobile device³. To further illustrate the importance of the mobile in relation to photo capture, **90% of people who have ever taken a photo have only done it with a mobile device — not a standard camera.**

However, the mobile device's ease of capturing images is not the only attraction. The quality of images being created via mobile is equally impressive, with Sony CEO Terushi Shimizu recently stating⁴ that he expects "that still images [from smartphones] will exceed the image quality of single-lens reflex cameras within the next few years."

In that 2007 product launch, Apple started a photography evolution and an internet access revolution by connecting the iPhone to the internet. This capability is now de facto, with almost 93% of users accessing the internet on their mobile in 2021⁵. With internet access comes the ability to purchase products online, and so was born mobile commerce, aka m-commerce.

² <https://www.buymobiles.net/blog/1-43-trillion-photos-were-taken-in-2020-but-how-many-of-them-were-captured-on-our-mobile-phones>

³ <https://morningconsult.com/2018/11/15/smartphone-owners-prefer-simple-features-like-battery-life-durability-camera-quality/>

⁴ <https://www.techradar.com/news/smartphones-will-kill-off-the-dslr-within-three-years-says-sony>

⁵ <https://fashiondiscounts.uk/mobile-commerce-statistics/>

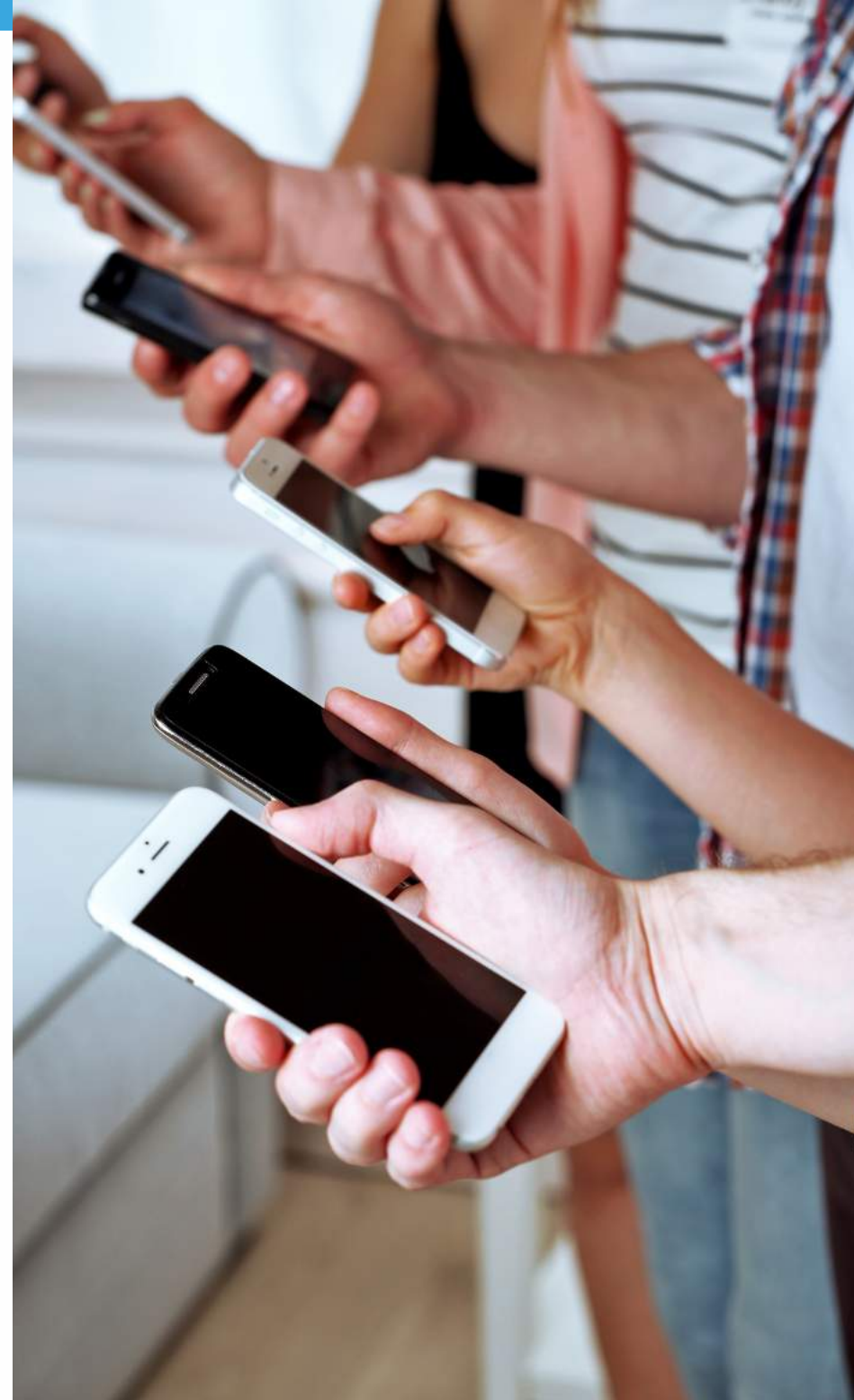


Early access to the internet via mobile was rudimentary, and many users were frustrated by poor interfaces and user experiences. As a result, early conversion rates were poor, with mobile devices used to browse products but not purchase them. But over time, the mobile user experience has developed significantly — so much so that the mobile is now the primary tool used for e-commerce.

M-commerce sales in 2021 were over US\$359 billion globally⁶, with mobile sales accounting for between 40% and 70% of all e-commerce sales, dependent on which source you believe. These figures highlight the need for mobile commerce to be front of mind for all retailers, especially for photo products. Therefore, developing mobile-optimised tools to browse photo products, design them using photos stored on the mobile device, and seamlessly purchase the finished products is critical. However, this also poses a dilemma.

Creating photo products can be complex and often requires large screens to visualise small details and intricacies on premium products such as photo books. While mobile devices are a perfect place for users to start their photo product journey, many want to move to bigger screens and different devices before they are ready to purchase.

⁶ <https://www.insiderintelligence.com/insights/mobile-commerce-shopping-trends-stats/>

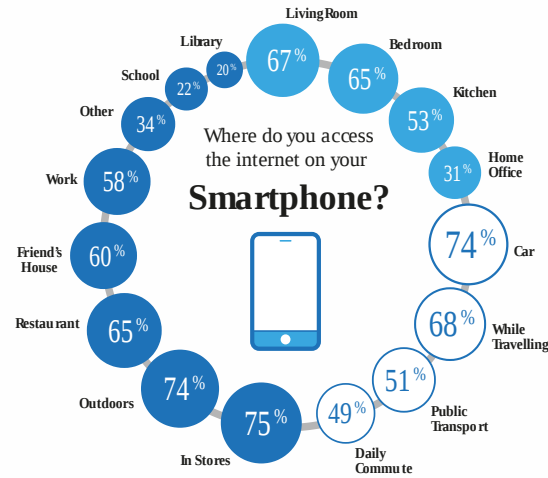
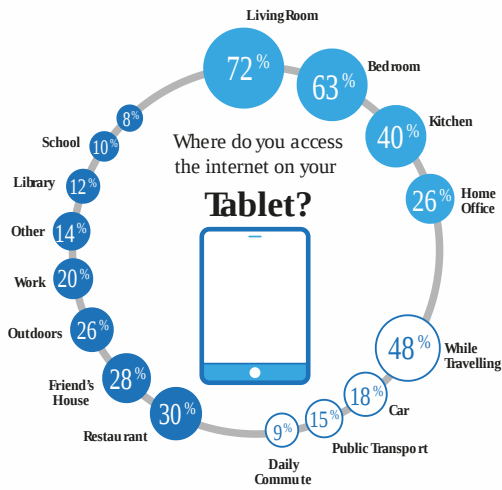




The Best Device for Photo Products: Mobile vs. Web

Developing a photo product service on the web is not enough for modern consumers — it will lack the convenience and interactivity of a mobile solution. But equally, developing a mobile-only solution will create issues. For example, users will likely only purchase simple products because they do not have the screen real-estate to customise the more complex, higher-margin products such as photo books.

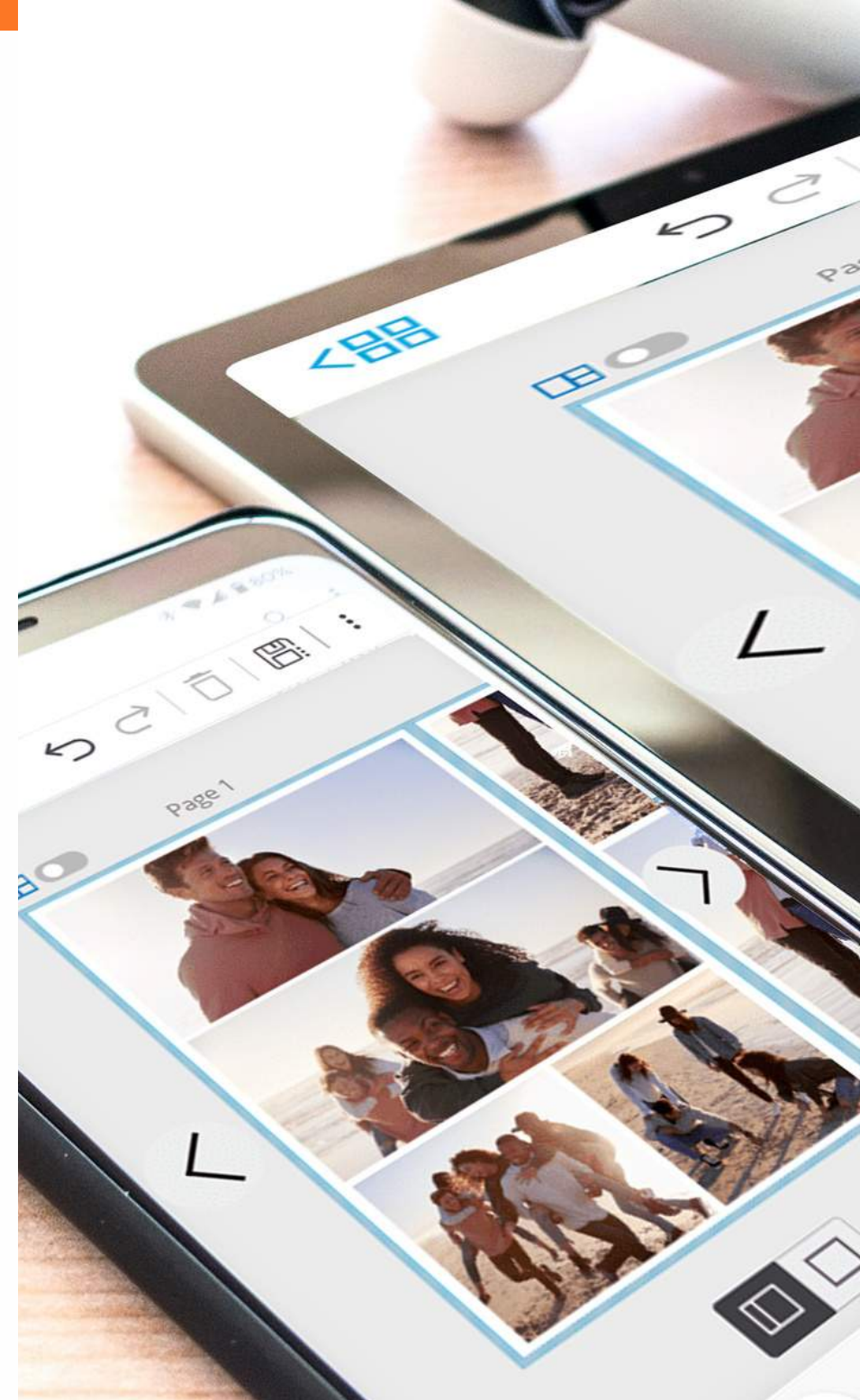
For any retailer entering the photo products market, their mobile and web tools must work harmoniously. Furthermore, they need to understand the typical customer journeys for each product and how customers use devices in different scenarios and environments. Some products, like simple photo printing, fit a 100% mobile experience. However, more complex products, like photo books, will typically start on mobile and then move to the web interface on a desktop or tablet due to the larger screen experience.



Source: Forrester Research

The key to managing this diverse customer journey is to create persistence and consistency across different sessions and devices. Photo product tools need to allow users to start a design on one device and continue it on a different one — with consistent interfaces across the platforms and a seamless experience during the browse, build, and purchase phases of the process. For example, Content Square⁷ found a 91% higher value of purchases made via a web interface on the desktop than on a mobile device. **Retailers who offer users the ability to begin a purchase on mobile and continue through to a web-based, more expansive experience will likely see higher close rates, on higher value products, with overall higher margins.**

⁷ Content Square, 2022 Digital Experience Benchmark





Who Uses What Products?

How users browse, create, and purchase photo products vary based on their persona. Two common and vastly different personas are Gen-Z and Families.



Gen Z

Description

Individual user, aged 18-25

Photo Products

Prints, personalised cards

Mobile Usage

Heavy – whole life can be accessed via mobile device

Avg Spend

<\$20 per transaction

Photo Devices

Mobile-only

Focus

Ease of use, speed, entirely mobile experience

Location Of Use

Train, coffee shop, with friends

Sample Journey

- Calendar alerts Amy that it is her friend's birthday this weekend.
- She chooses 3 photos of herself and her friend on the journey to her Pilates class.
- Amy selects a fun, personalised birthday card template on her mobile and adds the photos.
- Amy adds her own message to the card, purchases using Apple Pay, and heads off to Pilates.



Family

Description

Two persons, aged 25-40 - with kids

Photo Products

Wall prints, calendars, photo books

Mobile Usage

Frequent – uses mobile for work and stay in touch with friends

Avg Spend

\$20 - \$100 per transaction

Photo Devices

Mobiles, high-end SLR camera (for special occasions), and waterproof digital camera (for holidays)

Focus

Quality of product, ability to collaborate, multi-device

Location Of Use

While commuting, at home, office during breaks

Sample Journey

- Gina wants to create a photo book as a special gift for her parents, who will soon celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary.
- She searches through her photo library while on a break at work, on the train home, and again when she gets home — and adds them to a working folder.
- She asks her husband, Tom, to do the same.
- In the meantime, Gina identifies 2-3 potential styles for the photobook on her mobile and views them at home on her tablet so she can see them in more detail.
- Once she has settled on a style and the perfect photos, Gina moves to her laptop to add the photos to the template and make her own special tweaks to make the design perfect for her parents.
- With the design finished, she gets Tom to check it over once more on his tablet and to make the purchase.





Delivering Mobile Photo Products: To Build or Buy?

The benefits of adding the full range of photo products to a retailer's portfolio are obvious. From an increased share of wallet to new, high-margin revenue streams, e-commerce vendors and traditional retailers alike have strong drivers to deliver a photo product tool to access these benefits. But, to do that, they need to offer a solution that can operate seamlessly and consistently across both mobile and web platforms, maintains their brand image, and integrates with their existing website or commerce platform.

For retailers, this forces a decision.

Do they build a solution, or do they buy one?

Build



Buy





To Build

Retailers choosing to build their own mobile solutions have various options. They can utilise their own internal development teams, work with specialist mobile app developers, and even look to artificial intelligence (AI) focused curation tools to kick start the process.

There are several advantages of building a custom solution:



Technology Roadmap

Ensures ownership of the technology roadmap for feature enhancements, upgrades, and integrations. This provides complete control of the future development of the application and offers the ultimate ownership of strategy and capabilities.



Consistent Brand

Ensures the consistent application of the retailer's brand throughout the product and enables a consistent user experience throughout the creation and purchase of the photo product. The complete photo product experience should be seamless and consistent for the customer.



Privacy by Design

Allows the incorporation of "privacy by design" to ensure compliance with constantly changing data security, privacy and other regulations. The images used by customers in the creation of any photo product are incredibly precious and need to be kept private. However, in an age where facial recognition and identity theft are increasingly prevalent, the privacy of personal photos is an even more important aspect.





As you can see, there are numerous benefits to creating an in-house photo product. However, to realise those benefits, the retailer must have the relevant time, budget, and human resources to deliver the new application. Retailers who go down the build route often find this requirement to be just one of the many challenges they face:



Cross-Platform Solution

Cross-platform solution development is complex.



Mobile App Development

Mobile app development requires a niche skillset— a multi-disciplined team of web and mobile developers, together with user interface and data consistency experts from both teams.



Self-Build Projects

Self-build projects often start from scratch — leading to lengthy and costly development cycles.



Maintain Photo-Editing Software

Photo-editing software is complex to develop and maintain.



Photo-Editing Software Innovation

Photo-editing software requires constant innovation with evolving user needs — especially for the higher-end, higher-value products such as calendars and photo books.



Development Practices

The recent “great resignation” highlights the need for consistent and robust development practices. Frequently, when key application developers leave, organisations struggle to support and further develop the applications those developers have created.



To Buy

For many organisations, the prospect of building their own mobile-enabled photo editing solution is daunting. Perhaps they don't have a large, experienced in-house development team or simply want to get their new products to market in a short time frame. For these vendors, purchasing an off-the-shelf solution is attractive.

Whether the chosen solution is a white-label mobile app or a responsive HTML website, there are again pros and cons of this approach:

Pros to Buying



Rapid Delivery Of Solutions

Rapid delivery of solutions into the market



Code Development

Little to no code development is required



Off-the-Shelf Solutions

Off-the-shelf solutions typically have lower price points than internal development projects





Cons to Buying



Purchased Apps

Purchased apps rarely do everything that a retailer needs – and adding new functionality is not possible.



Integration

Integration with existing products and commerce engines can be challenging. We must ensure that the purchased app integrates into the current website, cart and checkout systems.



No Control Over Product Features or Roadmap

No control over product features or roadmap — you are at the mercy of the software provider regarding future releases and support of existing functionality.



Limited Branding Capabilities

Often limited branding capabilities other than adding a logo and customising the overall colour scheme.



Brand Identity Overlap

Using white-label apps leads to a high chance of brand identity overlap with competitors. Look-a-like apps have higher chances of being rejected by app stores.



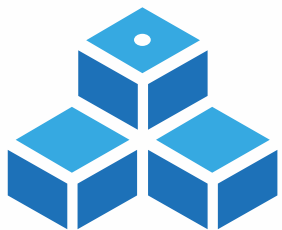
A Third Option: Blended Delivery

As we have seen, both building and buying mobile-enabled photo product solutions come with challenges. To determine the best option, companies need to assess their real motivation when wanting to sell photo products.

Most retailers have an existing photo offering. Adding mobile capabilities or enhancing the photo product offering is typically a way to extend their customer engagement and share of wallet. A vital part of this is to enable consistent and engaging customer experience, not just across devices but between the existing and new products.

To get the best from this shifting dynamic, the brand itself needs to own the overall shopping experience. The vendor needs the ability to embed mobile AND web photo tools into their existing brand and user experience. The way to do that is via a blended option.

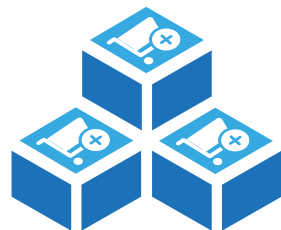
Build



Buy



Blend





Blend

The blended approach to creating photo product solutions uses an approach commonly found within software development. It uses functional building blocks, or components, to provide retailers access to existing tools for photo editing to embed into their existing websites and e-commerce platforms. This approach offers the flexibility and control of self-building a solution, but with the speed of buying a solution — it is the best of both worlds.

A blended approach uses either a software development kit (SDK) or application programmers' interface (API), providing pre-built tools and functionality for photo product tools across mobile and web environments. For example, these components could include pre-built photobook editors, integrations to standard web content management systems, and access to standard iOS and Android image storage and camera capabilities.

The blended approach allows retailers to embed these modular tools into existing websites and mobile applications to deliver significant benefits:



Rapid Return on Investment

Rapid Return on Investment to introduce new photo products or new categories such as photo books and calendars.



Consistent Multi-Channel Experience

Consistent multi-channel experience – ability to provide simple AND complex photo products from one solution.



Advanced Photo Editor Technology Development

Removes the need for in-house expertise in advanced photo editor technology development.



Scalable Technology Integration

Access to ready-to-implement, scalable technology that integrates seamlessly with your webshop or e-commerce platform.



Consistent User Experience

Ensures a consistent user experience for customers across web and mobile.



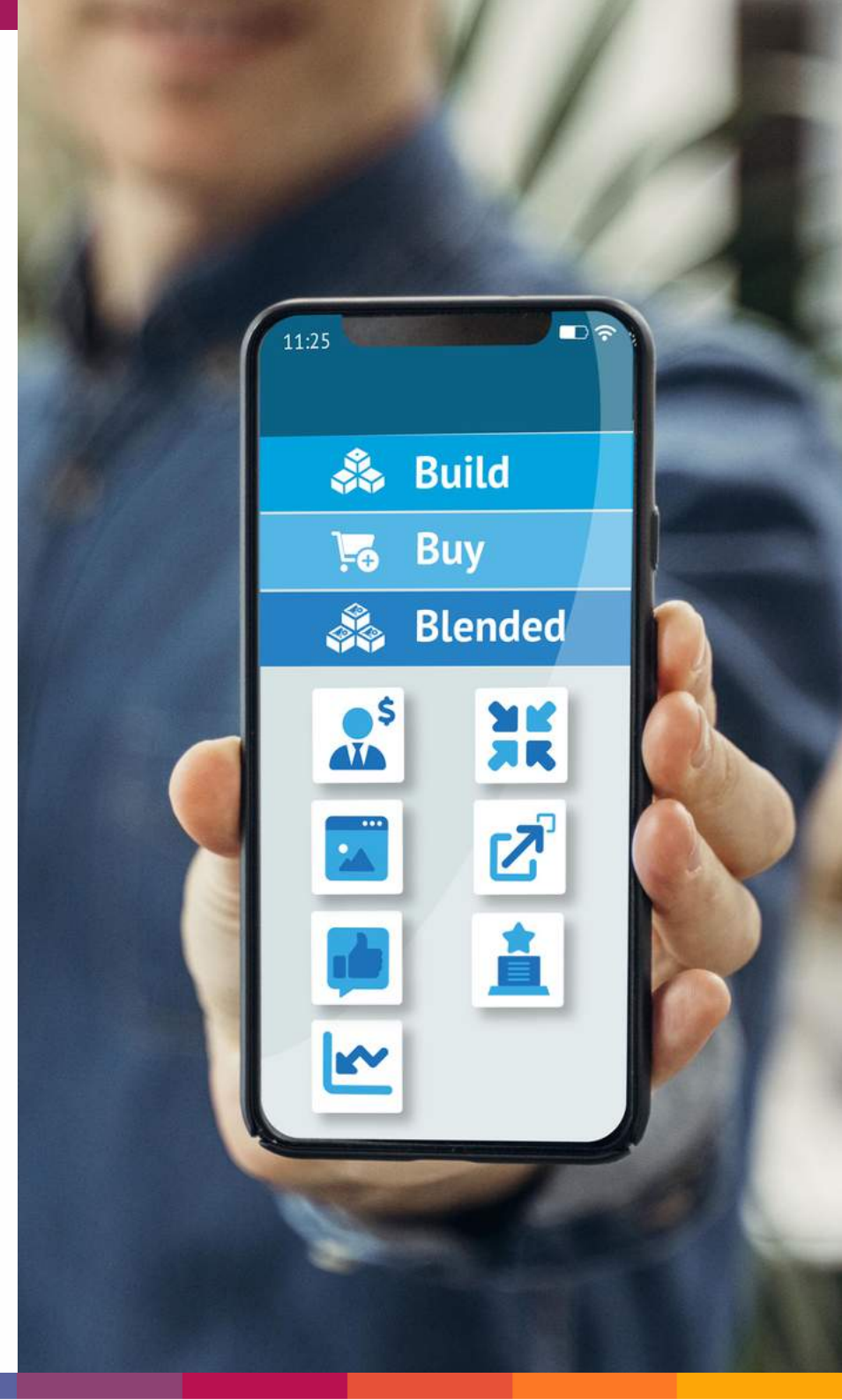
Best-of-Breed Technologies

Incorporates best-of-breed technologies to deliver outstanding customer journeys, consistent data management, and future-proof investment.



Reduced Investment

Reduced investment needed to develop, maintain, and upgrade photo editor software.



Mobile-Enabling YOUR Photo Products: Checklist

Faced with three different options for creating a mobile-enabled photo product offering (build, buy, and blend), retailers must select the route that makes the most sense for them. Choosing the best path to mobile-enabled photo products is a decision that needs careful consideration, and several factors come into play during the evaluation process.

The checklist below maps out six key considerations organisations need to evaluate as they explore how each of the three options stacks up against the other.



Strategic Need

- How important are the new features that we gain with each option?
- Do they provide a competitive advantage?
- Do they apply your brand throughout the product to create emotional buy-in from customers?



Simplicity

Which option is the simplest:

- to adopt?
- to implement?
- to purchase



Function

Which Option:

- delivers the functionality we require?
- allows us to integrate into any existing website or commerce platform?
- provides brand consistency?
- ensures data privacy and governance?



Skills

- Do we have the skills internally to use the option?
- If not, what is the cost of upskilling? And the time required?



Speed

- Which option will enable the fastest go-live?



Investment

What is the cost of each option?

- to develop
- to support
- to enhance



Mobile is the Future — Are You Ready?

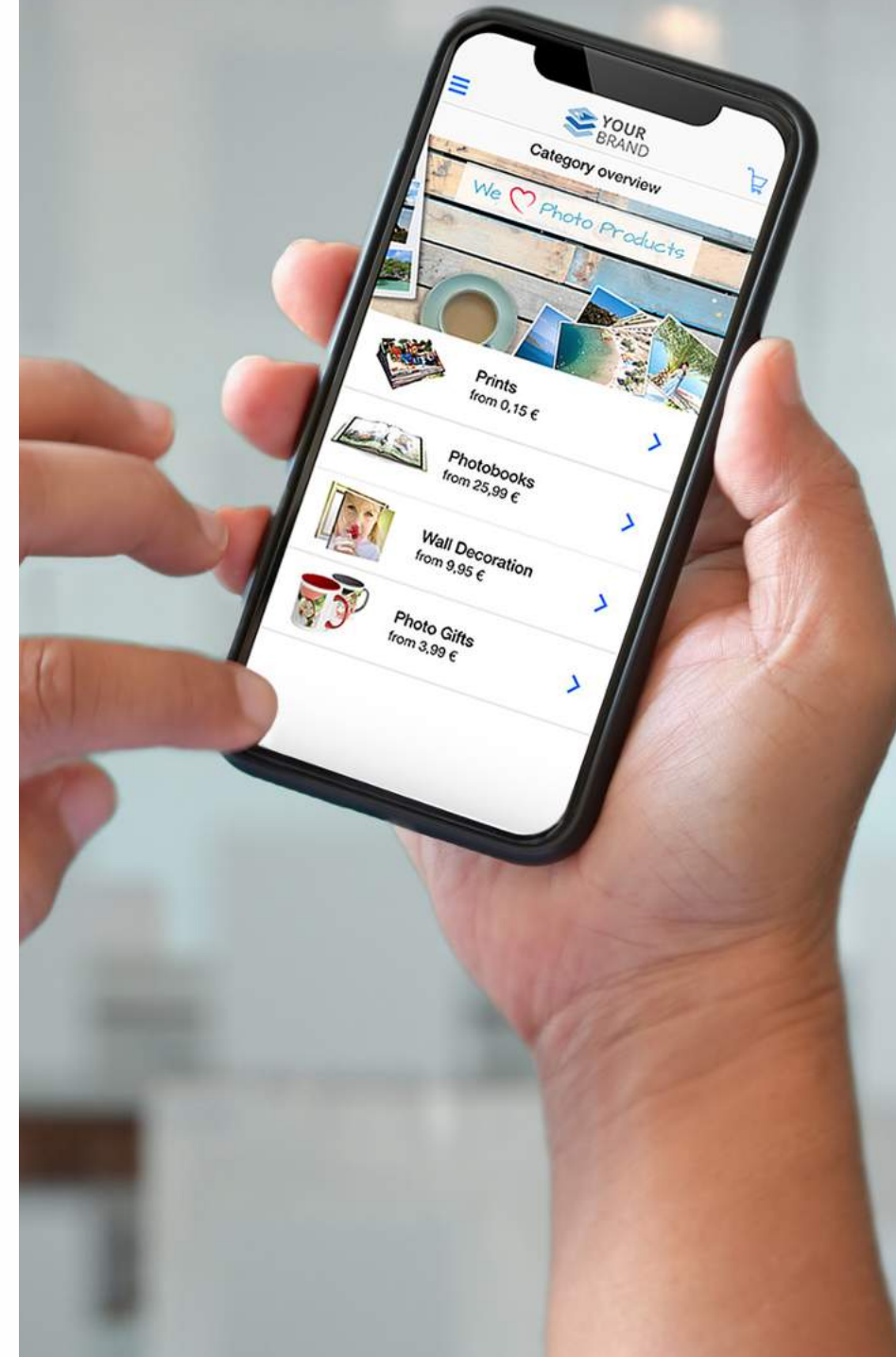
The photo products market is a perfect example of a set of seemingly disconnected entities coming together to create the perfect storm of activity. The growth of personal mobile usage for photo taking and as the primary vehicle for e-commerce purchasing is combining with a global desire to create personalised gifts and mementoes for family, friends, and loved ones. Photo products service this need perfectly. As retailers across the globe recognise this, they are searching for software solutions to help them service the market.

Many retailers offer simple photo products such as prints and personalised greetings cards — but are looking to expand their portfolio to include higher-margin premium products such as calendars and photobooks. Other vendors are new to the market entirely, perhaps looking to add photo products to an existing webstore or online marketplace. However, both groups recognise the need to deliver solutions that deliver engaging and consistent user experiences across mobile, tablet, and web platforms.

Identifying the right solution to address this challenge can seem daunting. But it doesn't have to be. Whether deciding to build a solution from scratch, buying a mobile or web app off-the-shelf, or combining both approaches and creating a custom solution using existing components (the blended approach) — the key to success is to clearly establish your needs and then choose appropriately.

Remembering that solution development is not a “one and done” project but will need refreshing as new mobile operating systems, devices, and capabilities are released, is of equal importance. But the most important thing is the sense of urgency required to take full advantage of this market opportunity.

NOW is the time to add mobile-enabled photo products for your customers. Wait any longer, and your competitors will have taken the initiative first – and with it, the lion's share of the audience and revenue. But take the initiative now, create the best fit solution for you and your audience, and your voyage into the world of mobile-enabled photo products will be a rich and rewarding one.





About ip.labs

Companies worldwide trust the solutions of ip.labs GmbH, founded in 2004, when it comes to creating and selling personalized photo products such as photo books, wall decorations or photo gifts. The flexible software solution can be easily adapted to different business models and is available as a web-based editor, download client and as mobile app. ip.labs has been a wholly owned subsidiary of FUJIFILM Europe GmbH, headquartered in Bonn, Germany, since 2008 and offers its business customers worldwide support on a 24/7 basis.

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