

Why Apple is pitching for the health market

June 12 2014, by Oliver Fitton And Daniel Prince



Credit: Mikhail Nilov from Pexels

Thousands of developers descended on San Fransisco recently to hear about Apple's big plans for the future. One of the highlights was confirmation, after long speculation, that the company would indeed be spreading into the health market.

Apple's Health App and associated developer's HealthKit is the first real indication of the company's engagement with this growing market. [The app](#) is designed to collect more than 60 indicators, such as calories burned or hours slept.

Health has become the central theme in some of the most popular apps on the market. MyFitnessPal, for example, will track calorie and macronutrient intake to support weight loss, gain or maintenance while others like Edumondo track exercise patterns using the GPS system in your phone.

And peripheral devices have been developed to feed more telemetric data into these systems. Wireless scales measure your body weight, heart rate and [body fat percentage](#) and upload that information to your device automatically. This information can be tracked over time and visualised to help you with your lifestyle goals. Nike and Apple have had a strong partnership in the fitness App and peripherals market for some years now. Nike+ began by tracking runs using the iPhone itself and then using an in-shoe tracker.

In fact, it's already quite a crowded market, with plenty of others touting their products. But Apple knows better than most how to turn a situation like this to its advantage. It's not like no one had thought of a tablet before the iPad came along, but it thrived and ultimately defined that market.

For a start, Healthkit lets all the systems which have until now been separate talk to one another by collecting all of their information in to one place on your iOS device. And crucially, it wants to give you the option of sending that information back to your doctor for it to be monitored.

When a user falls ill, Health is going to be a huge source of information

for doctors who could look back through years of [health](#) and lifestyle indicators to detect anomalies. More than this though, sending information to doctors gives them the opportunity to intervene before there is a problem.

Just like when a Formula 1 team tells the driver to change engine settings when a problem with the engine is detected, your doctor may be able to review your data remotely and detect problems before they occur. They could then suggest that you change your lifestyle or even that you pay a visit to a doctor.

Remote treatment

What is really interesting here is not what can be done today but what could be done in the future. Apple is likely to release its new health platform across different devices and collate them into a central and easily assessable, [real time](#) bill of health with Health App in the autumn, alongside the iOS 8 operating system. It may even release its own health tracking peripherals such as the much touted iWatch. These devices will monitor your biological information in more detail than ever before and US users will be able to send the information directly to their doctor if they are treated by an Apple partner organisation.

But what if your doctor wanted to do more than just monitor your health? The natural progression of this technology may be active response based on telemetric data. Implanted insulin pumps and pacemakers can already be configured wirelessly, the future may hold preventative implants which can be implanted before a problem occurs and activated when the problem is detected using your mobile device. Having a heart attack? No problem. Your future Health App will just release some adrenaline and call an ambulance giving them your exact location. Gone into anaphylactic shock? That's okay, here is your shot and a useful page about what you just ate to cause the shock as well as

what to do about it.

All these new services will of course come with security concerns, such as the ability for devices to be hacked. Your information will be shared with third party applications and many companies, such as in the pharmaceutical or insurance industries, could make a lot of money exploiting it. At the most basic level, [information](#) leaks are a bigger concern than ever before. Apple says it is taking these issues seriously and is using top-level security to protect data but we will all have to keep an eye on how this side of the market develops.

But if we can feel confident about security, the benefits of these technologies are evident for health services under increasing pressure from ageing populations and dwindling budgets. Real time health-monitoring smartphones are likely to be much cheaper than reactive medicine. Could we one day see iPhones available for free, as part of a health package or [national health service](#)?

Apple is again redefining the mobile phone, this time into a device which can save lives and money. But this deviation comes with serious vulnerability considerations both as a technology and as a money maker for health industries.

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