



## **Mobileizing Events**

How the Events Industry can benefit by utilizing the power of connected devices: a case study with the University of Virginia

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## INTRODUCTION

Putting on an event can be a hugely complex undertaking with unique challenges for three components: event participants, planners, and venue coordinators. Events, even small ones, must coordinate between the needs of each of these three groups, and the success of an event is directly related to how well this is done. Events have been planned and attended for generations at every scale imaginable. The challenges that existed 50 years ago are the same as today's, but technology has given us new tools to solve these problems in ever efficient and powerful ways.

To bring these two worlds together, we worked with the University of Virginia to develop a mobile app to support their 2012 Reunions Weekend. The university stages hundreds of events to welcome back thousands of alumni over a 3-day span. We re-imagined the reunion experience with careful consideration of how current mobile technology could remarkably improve the experience for everyone involved in all aspects of the festivities.

## OUR SOLUTION

We worked closely with Reunion planners at the University to understand the scope and dynamics of "Reunions Weekend". We developed a highly-acclaimed mobile app which served as both a reference guide and socialization tool for alumni and coordinators.

In crafting our solution we focused on the needs and perspectives of the alumni participating in the event, the event planners, and the venue coordinators to understand how each of them could benefit from a connected experience tailored to their needs. Some of the highlights of our app include:

- Support for all attending alumni, organized by class including details and contact information, if shared
- Schedule of events including registered attendees and tagged photos
- Photos taken by you or other classmates, ability to share with others

- Notifications of upcoming events
- Local hotel/transportation information
- Logistical information about the reunion

Pulling off a successful event requires effort on the participants, event planners, and venues.



Figure 1: The app allowed alumni to see a list of all Reunion events with indicators of the ones for which they registered.

## PARTICIPANTS

Participants often arrive at events in unfamiliar locations, so they often need help with transportation and navigation around the area. On top of that, wayfinding within the event space can be a daunting task as well. Until recently this kind of support been difficult to provide effectively; printouts and bulletin boards don't offer the power and convenience enabled by today's connected devices.

### *How we solved it*

Our solution centered around the experience of the individual attendees. Alumni were able to register with the application and view a list of other attending alumni in their class. Details included name(s), school, a list of Reunion events to which they registered, and the ability to contact the person directly if they shared their phone number. This made it trivial to look up other alumni and figure out where they might be or to contact them directly to get in touch. In addition

to facilitating contact, the app also encouraged socialization through photo sharing. Alumni could post photos of themselves, tag people or events, and view the photos of others in attendance. Another section of the app gave local information about transportation and lodging, with interactive maps to help in wayfinding.

In the future, we can imagine allowing participants to register for events directly from the app, and use it to plan their schedules. We would like to see support for wayfinding within the event space, so people will be able know where they are and get where they want to go without having to use a printed map or seek help from a staffer. With ubiquitous networking, the mobile phone is quite literally the perfect vehicle to deliver a superior events experience.

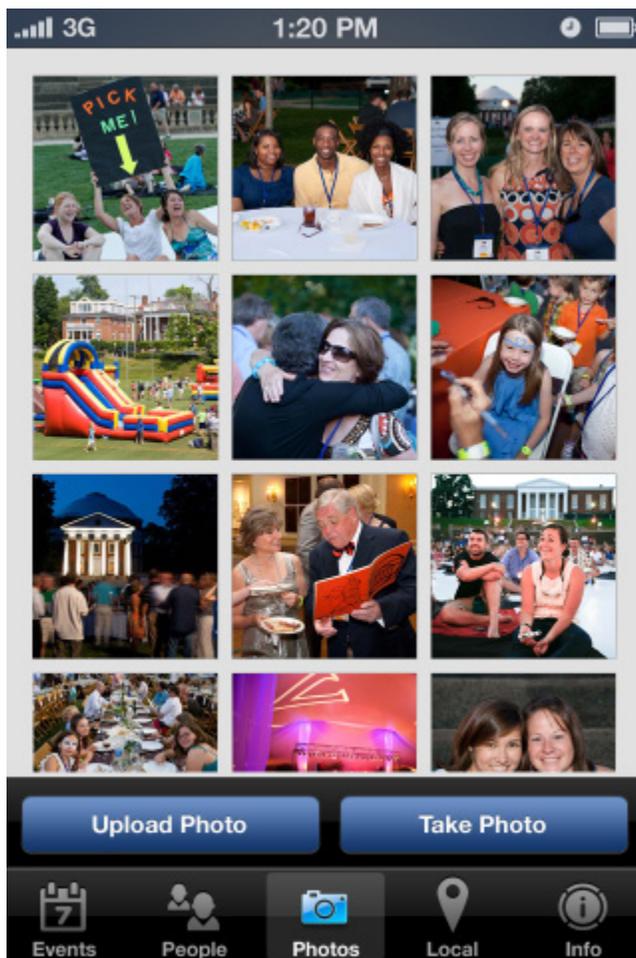


Figure 2: Alumni could view photos taken by their classmates, post their own photos, and tag other alumni and event locations in each photo they posted.

## PLANNERS

Most of the work for putting on an event occurs before it even begins, but there's still a lot to do while the event is in progress. Event planners are responsible for providing information and support to participants, and must have the tools *they* need to enable and empower the participants as quickly and efficiently as possible to ensure that everything runs as it's supposed to. Planners must be able to react quickly to changes in weather and facilities, and be able to communicate to as many participants as possible. This is a daunting logistical task that was nigh impossible before the advent of mobile connectivity.

### *How we solved it*

Our back-end infrastructure provided the mechanism for event planners to make changes to the event schedule at any time and the ability to immediately propagate those changes to anyone using the application via push notifications. The app itself allowed them the means to provide a single place for

alumni to go for any Reunion-related information that was always up-to-date and that could change as fast as the weather. This type of instant communication was an important tool for the Reunion staff that will only become moreso as usage increases.

The cost and logistical savings for the Reunion committee in 2012 were palpable and stand to increase significantly in the years ahead as the app gains visibility and expands to multiple platforms. This tool has the potential to eliminate paper schedules with last-minute changes and reduce the barrier between committee and participants to almost zero.

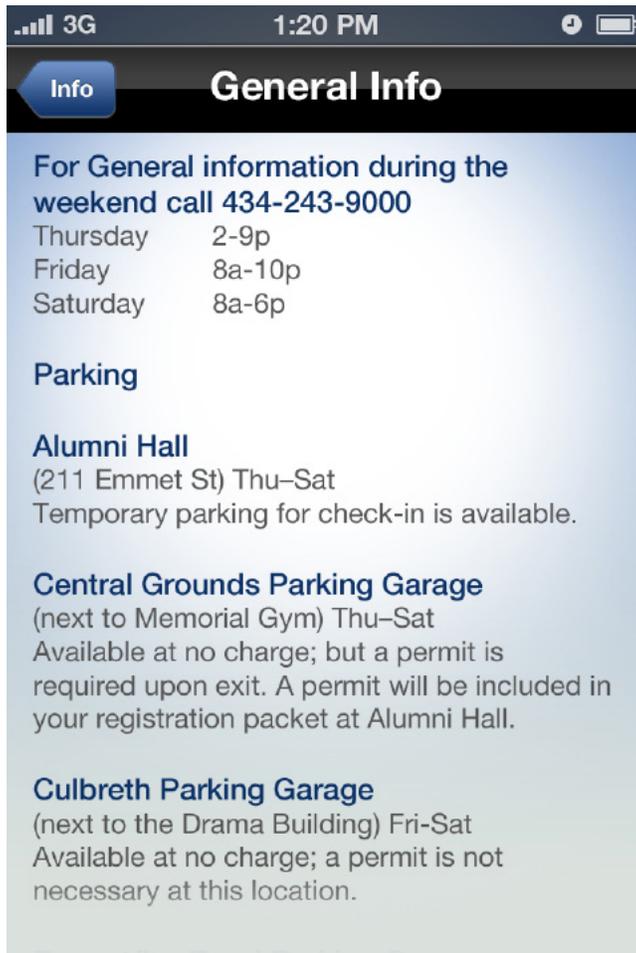


Figure 3: Logistical details for the Reunion were available and updated through the weekend as changes were made.

## VENUES

The other piece in the puzzle of putting on a successful event is the venue. There are some basic needs of the event which need to be supported (parking, facilities, security, tech, food service, etc). While much of these can be orchestrated by the planners, the venue is often the one providing them, and responsible for their maintenance throughout the event. Without a shared communication mechanism, venue coordinators and planners didn't know what to expect from each other, which added needless complications and stress.

### *How we solved it*

Even though the University of Virginia serves as both the venue coordinator and event planner, there is still a need for coordination between the departments responsible for various services, as well as the planning committee. Our app became a resource for them to collect and disseminate logistical information related to the Reunion. It highlighted venue needs and shortcomings and made it easier to get these issues addressed. It gave insight into the overall plan of the Reunions Weekend so everyone knew what to expect and how to prepare.

## **"UNBELIEVABLY HELPFUL"**

The response we got from the Reunion coordinators and alumni was overwhelmingly positive. A survey of Reunions attendees found that over 30% had used the application, even though it was available on just a single platform and with last-minute word-of-mouth marketing. Of those

who used it nearly everyone found the app helpful, and many were very enthusiastic and wanted the all Reunions Weekend registration and communication to be done through the app.

From the standpoint of the Reunion coordinators, the app was an enormous success, enabling them to reach more people quicker than they had ever thought possible. Their only complaint was that the app wasn't available on more platforms, and they are eager for a larger rollout in 2013. Here are some of the comments we received from alumni:

"yes, very helpful, especially as it rained, we could see how things were moving and changing in real time."

"So helpful!!!! It rocked!"

"Unbelievably helpful."

"Loved it!"

"Extremely helpful seeing what you were registered for and where it was located."

"It was very helpful throughout the weekend."