HOW SOFTWARE WORKS · BUILDER · 12 MIN READ

Mobile apps: web apps, PWAs and app stores

When a mobile-friendly website is enough, when a PWA helps, and what it takes to ship to the App Store and Google Play.

Pass the check (4 of 5) online to earn the “Pocket Builder” badge:
https://digitalbuilders757.com/university/study/mobile-apps-pwas-and-app-stores

Three ways to be on a phone

- Mobile-friendly web app: a website that works great on phones. Nothing to install; one link works everywhere. Start here.
- PWA (progressive web app): a web app that can be added to the home screen, open full screen, and work partly offline, with some support for notifications.
- Native or cross-platform app: installed from the App Store or Google Play, with full access to phone features (camera, background tasks, widgets). React Native with Expo and Flutter let one codebase target both stores.

Do you really need an app store app?

Store apps need developer accounts, store reviews, privacy disclosures, screenshots and updates for each platform. They're worth it when you need deep phone features, offline use, or users expect to find you in a store. For most first projects, a fast mobile-friendly web app or PWA reaches more people sooner.

Building mobile with AI

Prompt-to-app builders make responsive web apps by default; ask for 'mobile-first, large tap targets, works one-handed'. For store apps, coding agents can work in an Expo project, and services like Expo's build tools handle compiling and submitting. Test on real phones, both iPhone and Android, not just a desktop browser window.

Mobile must-haves

- Tap targets at least about 44 pixels; text readable without zooming.
- Fast on a slow connection: small images, little JavaScript on the first screen.
- Forms that use the right keyboards (email, number) and autofill.
- Works in portrait and landscape, with safe space around notches.

Key terms

PWA (progressive web app)
A web app that can be installed to a phone's home screen and work partly offline.

Native app
An app installed from the App Store or Google Play with full access to phone features.

Responsive design
Layouts that adapt to any screen size, from phone to desktop.

App store
Apple's App Store or Google Play, where native apps are reviewed and installed.

Front end
The part of an app people see and touch: pages, buttons, forms.

Try it: Phone-test something you built

1. Open your project on two real phones (ask a friend for the other platform).
2. Try every screen one-handed; note anything too small or hard to tap.
3. Ask your AI tool to fix the top three issues 'mobile-first'.
4. Optional: ask it to make the app installable as a PWA and add it to your home screen.

KNOWLEDGE CHECK

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5 questions. Circle one answer for each; 4 or more correct passes. Answers are at the back.

1. What's usually the best first way to reach people on phones?

A. An app store app for both platforms
B. A desktop download
C. A fax
D. A fast, mobile-friendly web app

2. What is a PWA?

A. A web app you can install to the home screen
B. A paid web account that unlocks premium app features
C. A phone brand
D. A private app store that companies use to share apps with staff

3. Which tools let one codebase ship to both iPhone and Android stores?

A. Swift, since Apple's language also runs on Android phones
B. React Native with Expo, or Flutter
C. CSS media queries
D. DNS

4. What does shipping to app stores add?

A. Nothing
B. Free marketing guaranteed
C. Developer accounts, store reviews, privacy disclosures and per-platform updates
D. Automatic revenue

5. Best way to test mobile usability?

A. Shrink your desktop browser window, which shows exactly what phones see
B. Ask the AI if it's fine
C. Skip testing
D. Use real iPhone and Android phones, one-handed

Official sites

web.dev: Progressive Web Apps: https://web.dev/explore/progressive-web-apps
Expo (React Native): https://expo.dev
Flutter: https://flutter.dev

Last reviewed 2026-11-25. AI tools change fast; check each tool's own site for current features, plans and prices.

ANSWER KEY

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1. D: A fast, mobile-friendly web app
A link that works on every phone reaches people soonest, with nothing to install.

2. A: A web app you can install to the home screen
Progressive web apps add app-like features to a website.

3. B: React Native with Expo, or Flutter
Cross-platform frameworks target both stores from one codebase.

4. C: Developer accounts, store reviews, privacy disclosures and per-platform updates
Stores bring reach and features, plus real overhead.

5. D: Use real iPhone and Android phones, one-handed
Real devices reveal tap, speed and keyboard problems a desktop window hides.