

# How to Run an App Contest



Powering software competitions that drive innovation and awareness

# 1 Why Bother?

Challenges get people excited, and provide enough time for getting the word out to a broad audience who can develop market-ready apps on their own schedule. The ROI is fantastic when executed correctly, because you get:

## **A Bigger Audience**

Participation in live app competitions, like hackathons, is constrained by the relative convenience of geography and timing. Running an online app contest over the course of several months rallies a potentially global audience to participate, but be sure to follow local competition law, as regulations vary greatly from country-to-country.

## **Higher Caliber Apps**

Quality takes time. If you want developers to create meaningful, robust apps with a realistic chance of being monetized, or at least downloaded, then you need to give them enough of a head start and incentive to do so. There's no sense engaging developers if their work will never make it into the wild.

## **More Apps**

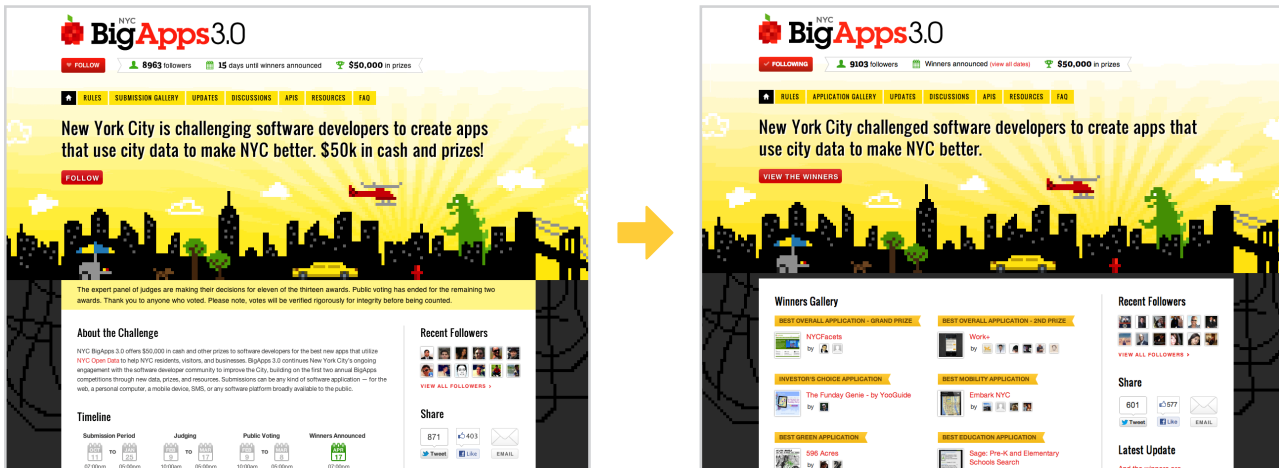
For the same price an organization would pay to privately contract two marketable apps built on their platform, they can offer prize money that gets dozens of apps built, which many developers will build businesses around whether they win a prize or not.

## **Media Attention**

App competitions engage potential end-users and developers alike. A headline like, “\_\_ is challenging software developers to win \$\_,000 in prizes by creating the best apps that \_\_” is much more compelling than “\_\_ launches API” or “\_\_ opens platform for developers”. Anyone who cares about the technology or cause feels like they can participate, either as a voting spectator or a submitting entrant, which is a big win.

## Social Sharing

There are many reasons to share an app competition. Like “Vote for my submission,” “I thought this might interest you,” and “Which do you think is best?”. Couple these with a nice hashtag and a “Popular Choice” or “Fan’s Choice” prize determined by public voting, and you’ve got yourself a social media darling.



*The ChallengePost platform transitions from participant-focused to winner showcase.*

## 2 The Platform

Running an app competition is far more work than it appears at a surface level, so you are wise to skip any notions of cobbling together an adequate web presence in-house, and instead focus on equipping your team with the right tools for the job (e.g., orchestrating the judging process, displaying submissions elegantly, verifying public votes, enabling social sharing, managing community forums, broadcasting email updates to interested followers, etc.).

Your app challenge platform also must equally serve third-party judges and entrants, which means providing fluid access to rules, tools (APIs, SDKs, data sets), discussion forums, FAQs, update notifications, submission forms/flow, event schedules and judging criteria. Hosting a developer contest on a blog post, obscure sub-domain, or scattering all the elements in different places (e.g., the registration page and submission gallery aren't connected) makes it frustratingly hard to find and easy to

forget. The entire competition should be held on a unified platform that engages your audience from initial discovery all the way through winner announcements. It should be a dynamic reflection of the ongoing efforts leading up to winners being announced. Then, the platform should transition into a permanent showcase that publicly recognizes and rewards all participants for their contribution to your ecosystem, and sheds a positive light on your willingness to reward them for doing so.

### 3 The Community

App competitions are intended grow your developer community, not just rally and reward your existing network. Casting a wide net is essential, as participating developers come in many variations:

**Mercenaries** who make a large portion of their income by entering hackathons and challenges where their high-level skills give them the best chance at a payday.

**Corporate engineers** looking for a productive means to focus their side-projects/hobby hacks.

**Students** aiming to hone their skills in the wild, or submit a project for class credit.

**App development shops** seeking an interesting and potentially profitable in-house project as an alternative to their usual contract-based development work for clients.

**Software companies** who see participating in your app challenge as a showcase for their product's capabilities.

**Integrators** who make a living extending software capabilities to play nicely together, and often have the bits and pieces already built to assemble for your challenge.

**Casual hobbyists** that make the majority of their living doing something unrelated, but participate in challenges for the adventure and potential recognition.

The best competition management platforms specialize in a certain type of contest (e.g., software, videos, design) and come with a built-in community that already understands the skills and processes entailed in participating. In the case of an app competition platform, these are proficient developers who already know and trust the platform creator to bring them interesting software development opportunities. Part of the deal for using the challenge management suite should be some level of access to this community. (More on this in the “Promotion” section below.)

## **4 Incentives**

App developers are highly paid, sought-after and selective about their work, so offering up a free iPad won't cut it to get them excited.

### **Cash**

Considering that privately contracting a viable app ranges from about \$10,000-\$50,000, offering less to the winner(s) doesn't make much sense, especially considering you'll get possibly hundreds of high quality submissions who won't win a penny, but who still built apps on your platform. Cash is king, but it's not the only way to draw a crowd.

### **Recognition**

Developers crave attention, particularly when the (literal or figurative) spotlight casts them as a champion amongst peers. Offer a paid trip to a conference, where they'll get stage time to demo winning work, and maybe even hold up an oversized check.

### **Access**

Whether it's to a prominent incubator program, an executive team private chat, or in-house engineering expertise, developers want what other developers don't — or better yet, can't — have. Use your connections.

## Marketing Assistance

Even the best apps are useless if nobody finds them to download. Anything you can do to get them in front of end-users, like featured placement at the top of an app marketplace or assistance with ad campaigns, is highly enticing.

## Meaning

If you can pull at heartstrings, do it (e.g., “Apps for [Insert Cause Here]”). Sometimes people want to make a difference more than they want to make money.




## Diversity

Do not make the mistake of allocating all prizes to a single winner, as this makes people hesitant to participate, because their chances of winning are slim. Instead, drive a wide range of innovation and use cases by allocation prizes accordingly.

For example:

- 1st and 2nd overall
- Best Game
- Best Social Media App
- Best Productivity Tool
- Best Student-Made App
- Popular Choice

Note: There is some risk associated with assigning prizes to particular use cases, because the same app could potentially win two prizes (e.g., Best Overall and Best Game), and weak submissions could win prizes in categories with low participation.

 <b>1st Place</b> \$15,000 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- \$15,000 cash prize</li><li>- All expenses paid trip to CODESTRONG</li><li>- Launch application on stage</li><li>- Nexus 7 tablet</li></ul>	 <b>2nd Place</b> \$5,000 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- \$5,000 cash prize</li><li>- All expenses paid trip to CODESTRONG</li><li>- Launch application on stage</li><li>- Nexus 7 tablet</li></ul>	 <b>\$5k Appcelerator Cloud Services Bonus</b> \$5,000 <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Best use of Appcelerator Cloud Services within the app</li><li>- This prize may be stand-alone or may be added to one of the other cash prizes</li></ul>
---	---	--

Prizes for the Appcelerator Mobile Dev Challenge incorporate use cases and co-sponsors

## 5 Stages & Timing

Successful app competitions — those that generate palpable buzz and spur the creation of a wide range of robust, marketable apps — have a fairly predictable life cycle.

### Planning

This project is going to require more resources than it seems at first glance, both in terms of budget and manpower. Depending on the size of your organization, you'll need buy-in from Marketing, PR, Finance, Operations, Product and Engineering teams. Everyone needs to understand the goals of running this app contest, and what is expected of them throughout the next several months. The breadth of running a developer competition is a large part of why many companies choose to partner with ChallengePost as an extension of their team, but even with a partner handling most of the heavy lifting, you should start getting everyone on the same page several weeks in advance.

### Promotion

#### A. PRESS

Generally, the tech media loves a good contest, but “Company X is offering \$Y to developers who Z” isn't quite the novelty it once was, so don't expect an immediate frenzy from the big players. They'll give you some passive coverage, but niche industry-specific publications are more likely to gush. Also, reach out to (non-competitive) device manufacturers and wireless service providers, as they're always looking to glean attention where innovation lies.

#### B. YOUR EXISTING COMMUNITY

Sure, you've got to post on your blog and email everyone you know about the app contest, but that's just a starting point for reaching their collective networks. You need to compel everyone who touches your developer program to recruit their friends and colleagues. So ask them to, and make it easy by providing a brief description and short-link to pass along.

## C. PARTNER COMMUNITIES

If what's good for you is also good for somebody else, tell that somebody else. Your API management services, hosting provider, internet service provider and other IT vendors, recruiters, code repositories, PR and marketing firms — let them all know this app challenge is important, and that you'd appreciate their help getting the word out.

## D. SOCIAL MEDIA

Decide on a unique, relevant hashtag (e.g. #\_\_AppChallenge or #AppsFor\_\_), stick to it, and include it in everything. EVERYTHING. Every relevant blog post, email update, discussion thread and article should all be anchored with your hashtag. Also, make extra effort to publicly recognize and celebrate participants and their contributions.



*#YourChallengeNeedsAHashtag*

## E. OFFLINE

Get out there! There were over 500 hackathons in the U.S. alone in 2012, which means on any given weekend there is a room full of developers in your area who are itching to learn about interesting software tools and contests. Usually the organizers are happy to let you make a brief announcement promoting your app challenge, or will at least let you pass out some flyers. Sponsoring hackathons is typically inexpensive, so for the cost of a few boxes of pizza, you can get your name, logos and links in front of this engaged developer audience, who all have their own peer networks they tend to keep in the loop. Get involved in Meetups,

too. Nobody wants to be given a sales pitch, but *“I just wanted to let you know about an awesome developer competition we’re running. It’s called the \_\_\_ and you can learn more at \_\_\_.com, or come ask me a question.”* will do great to spur interest.

## Ideas

Running an ideas completion, or “ideation phase,” in the early phase of an app challenge is a fantastic way to engage non-technical enthusiasts to make a meaningful contribution to the outcome of your app competition. After all, there is nobody better to guide a developer’s vision than potential end-users, and people are more likely to spread the word about your app challenge if they have a means to participate. It’s generally not advisable to require that winning ideas be incorporated into apps though, as this may curb the breadth of innovation. Ideation challenges get all stakeholders’ creative juices flowing.



*Ideas competitions engage non-technical enthusiasts with guiding developers’ product vision.*

## Apps

Try not to panic when there are only a few — or maybe even zero — apps submitted a week prior to the submission deadline. Like everybody, developers tend to procrastinate, and they may fear tipping their hand by showing competitors their work any sooner than necessary. Also, keep in mind that software is never really









finished, so participants are likely waiting until the latest round of revisions are implemented before submitting. The apps are coming. They really are.

When the app submissions do come in, you'll need all hands on deck quickly verifying functional and appropriate fit before displaying them publicly or sending to judges. Keep in mind some will be half-baked duds unworthy of prize consideration, but be sure to display all qualifying submissions to preserve the fairness of the competition and celebrate all contributions. Submitters should then be notified when their submissions are made public so they can spread the word... and stop worrying about whether and when this will happen.

## Judging and Voting

A panel of 4-7 "celebrity" judges (e.g., executives, investors, journalists and other industry thought leaders) is suggested to add prestige to your app challenge.

Getting asked to be a judge is usually perceived as a compliment, so feel free to include partners and other contacts whose good graces you're courting. Just keep in mind that you're asking them to donate valuable time, and that all judges may need to be available at the same time for a call or meeting to discuss expectations and procedures.

	<b>Dawn Barber</b> <i>Co-founder, New York Tech Meetup</i>		<b>Glenn Goldstein</b> <i>Vice President, Video Technology Strategy, MTV Networks</i>
	<b>Ken Bronfin</b> <i>President, Hearst Interactive Media</i>		<b>David Lerner</b> <i>Director of Venture Lab, Columbia Technology Ventures</i>
	<b>David Carroll</b> <i>Director, MFA Design + Technology, Associate Professor of Media Design at Parsons The New School for Design</i>		<b>Roger Neal</b> <i>Executive Director, NYC Media Lab</i>
	<b>Chris Fralic</b> <i>Partner, First Round Capital</i>		<b>Frank Rimalovski</b> <i>Managing Director, NYU Innovation Venture Fund</i>

Celebrity panels draw attention and build prestige for app challenges.

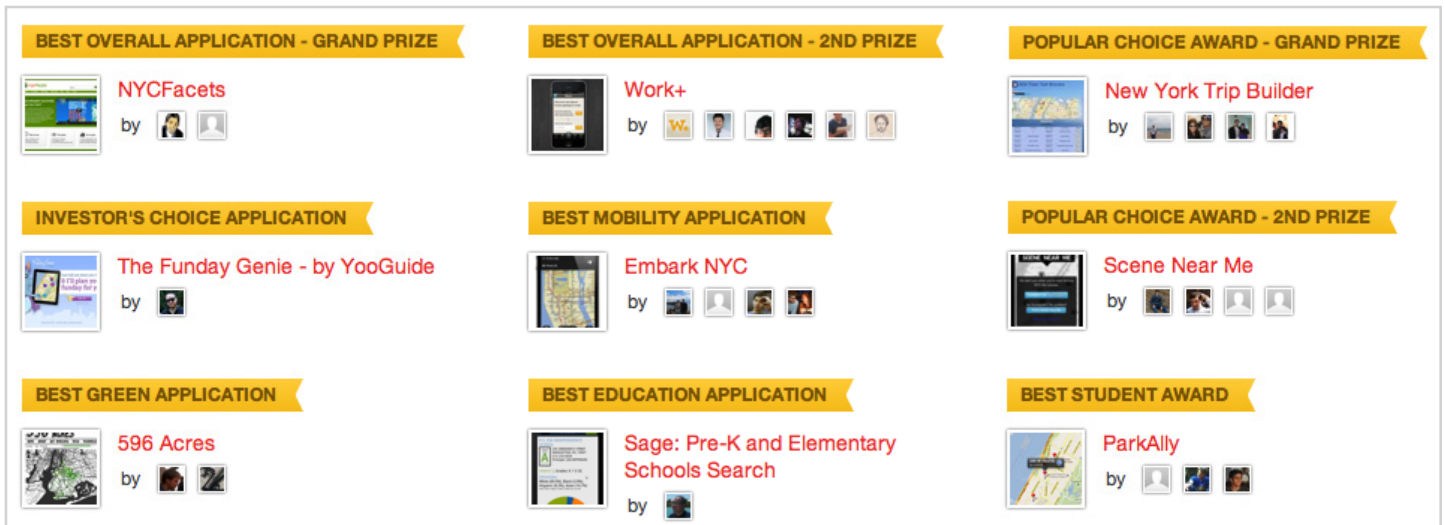
If you're using a proper competition management platform, judges should have designated login credentials that enable them to view and rate submissions according to custom criteria established by challenge organizers. Being respectful of judges' time, you may want to trim the number of submissions sent their way to a manageable bunch of "finalists" representing the highest quality submissions, as sifting through 20+ submissions for several different prize categories can be taxing. Also, keep in mind that judges are likely to procrastinate slogging through their duties, so it may take a few subtle deadline reminders to keep them up to speed.

In tandem with panel judging, it is strongly recommended that one or two "Popular Choice" prizes be awarded to the submission(s) receiving the most legitimate public votes. This is a fantastic way to achieve maximum engagement for your app competition and brand, because submitters will be compelled to leverage their online and offline networks soliciting votes. (Just make sure the platform has mechanisms for verifying that all votes are cast by live humans, not bots and other automated spam tools). Keep in mind that "Popular Choice" prizes are marketing tools (challenge websites tend to see a 500%+ increase in traffic during the final days of public voting) that usually reward submitters with the most friends, not necessarily the highest quality apps.

## **Awards**

Once winners have been determined, it's important to treat the non-winners with as much gratitude as the winners. At minimum, all non-winning participants should get a personalized response thanking them for their contribution to your software ecosystem, and encouraging them to get in touch with your team to continue improving their product and better their chances at winning next time. Winners should be congratulated on their accomplishment via phone if possible, and made aware of the next steps regarding promoting and awarding their victory. These next steps may include presenting their work at an awards ceremony or conference, participating in interviews and case studies, and legal legwork to verify eligibility before prizes are exchanged. Then, issue a press release stressing the breadth and

quality of app submissions, as well as what distinguished the winners. Everyone should feel good about their experience, whether or not they won. Make sure the challenge website transitions its focus to highlight the winners, and serve as an ongoing celebration of your company's efforts to drive and reward their innovation.



NYC BigApps 3.0 winners

## After

It is legally imperative to collect affidavits verifying winners' eligibility before distributing prizes. Once this is out of the way, book logistics for awards ceremony travel if appropriate. Maybe even mix in an oversized-check or trophy for photo ops that give the press and your editorial team something flashy to publish. Interview winners about their experience, and turn these into case studies.

Given that no app is ever really finished, create a program to nurture the ongoing evolution of all quality submissions. It's highly likely that an app that didn't win will become the most valuable long-term, so organize periodic workshops inviting developers to work hand-in-hand with your team on "Version 2.0." Maybe even offer some funding or office space to incubate promising apps and their accompanying developer talent, as your next great app could come with your next great hire. Make every effort to ensure code continues to be written and refined long after the end of your app competition.