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11 best practices for
a great app onboarding

Content

What is app user onboarding?

The most pivotal stage in an app user's journey - app user onboarding is the process of introducing the app and its features to first-time users and making sure that they get the best out of the app. Everything that lies between a user launching an app for the very first time till the user reaches the 'aha moment' is what onboarding is all about. And reducing this time-to-value, which is the time taken by a user to see the value of your app, is what effective onboarding is all about.

Every good/bad/great experience of an app user can be tied back to the onboarding experience since it is the first impression that a user has of the app. A well-orchestrated app onboarding journey makes your users come back to the app, and with a poor one, you run the risk of users abandoning your app, for good.

Why is app user onboarding important?

A report by Appsflyer indicates that:

53%

of apps are uninstalled
within 30 days of
download

45%

of the uninstalls that occur
within 30 days of download, take
place within the first 24 hours

There are a number of reasons that can be attributed to users uninstalling the apps: Poor UI & UX, apps being irrelevant or users being unable to find any value from using the app. For now, let's focus on the third reason. When users fail to realize how your app is addressing their pain point and delivering some expected value to them, they will simply stop using the app.

When users start using any new product, they travel through a hype cycle. They first reach the **'peak of inflated expectations'** hoping that your product can successfully address their problems. But this curve often goes down and the user ends up reaching the **'Trough of disillusionment',** because of a poor onboarding experience.

A good onboarding experience, on the other hand, takes the user from the 'Peak of inflated expectations' to **'The slope of enlightenment'** and much beyond that to the extent that these users could become brand advocates.
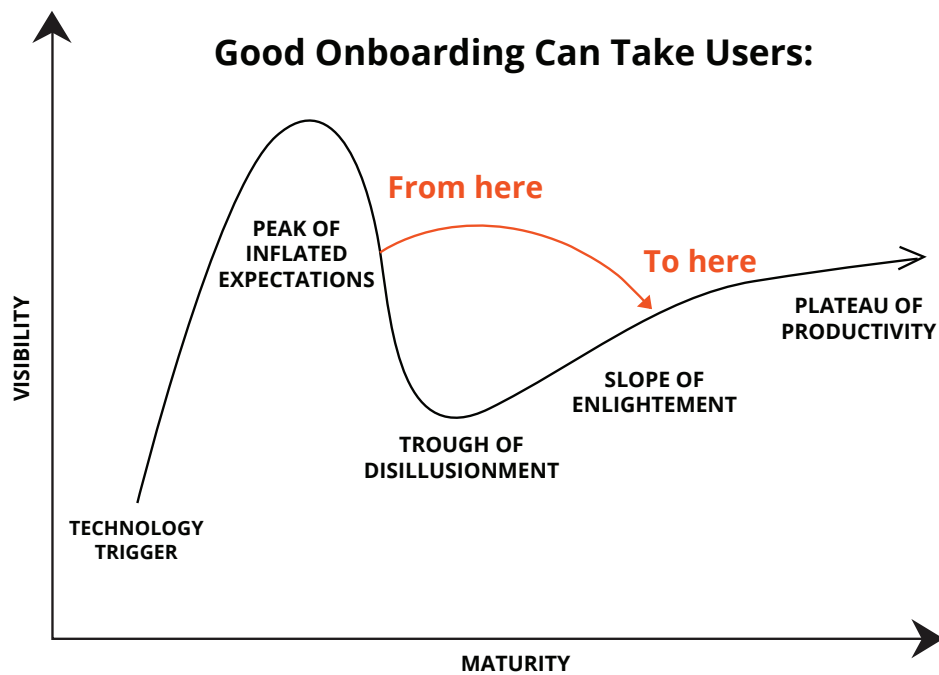
Good Onboarding Can Take Users:

VISIBILITY

PEAK OF
INFLATED
EXPECTATIONS

From here

To here

PLATEAU OF
PRODUCTIVITY

SLOPE OF
ENLIGHTENMENT

TROUGH OF
DISILLUSIONMENT

TECHNOLOGY
TRIGGER

MATURITY

*Image Source: https://i1.wp.com/danielelizalde.com/wp-content/uploads/
2014/09/OnboardingHypeCurve.png?ssl=1*

There's a reason behind every purchase decision a user takes. There's a
problem, there's a product that solves that problem and therefore a customer
would go buy it in the anticipation that the product would successfully
help get rid of the problem. This is a basic logical theory that the **JTDB
(Job-to-be-done) framework** talks about. There's an unmet need/want
that arises as a result of a trigger which is essentially a cue that tells you
what needs to be done. This is exactly the reason why a person chooses
to behave in a certain way or chooses a particular solution. Now, apply
this to an app. Why would a user download an app? Because of the
job-to-be-done. In the initial interactions, if an app is not being able to
solve the user's JTBD or rather a user doesn't believe that the app can
actually solve the JTDB, they would uninstall/drop off immediately.

Here's where the problem for every product manager begins. And the
very first step to solving that is a well-crafted app onboarding experience
(which can affect your bottom line to a great extent)that tells users
clearly what to expect and how to best use the relevant app features to
complete key tasks with utmost ease and convenience.

Your checklist for an effective app user onboarding

It's obvious that if a user has downloaded your app, he/she is already interested in it. But an effective onboarding is needed to fuel up that interest and keep users motivated to engage in repeated interactions.

We've put together some of the best app user onboarding practices for you to tick off while you put together your user's app onboarding journey:

1. Put a goal to the onboarding journey

A great onboarding journey is one that has a definite end goal to it. You should be clear about what exactly you want your users to get out of the onboarding journey. Do you want users to simply sign up? Or you want to initiate a conversion right at the beginning? Or any other specific action you want your users to take at the end of the app onboarding journey. And that's just not it. Depending upon the individual user personas and the jobs-to-be-done, as product managers, you need to identify what a successful onboarding would look like for each of these users and the problem they're trying to solve using your app, and accordingly build an onboarding flow that would be most relevant to specific user segments.

Canva, an online design tool makes it easy for non-designers to start working on the app by asking them what they are using the app for? (Work/personal/education). A user who would select work would be shown a tailored onboarding experience (like presentation templates) while the one using the app for personal reasons, would be shown a distinct onboarding (like anniversary invitation templates).

So, depending on the user persona and also the purpose for using the

app, a specific onboarding is triggered to make the FTUX (First time user experience) much more seamless.

2. Highlight critical (and only the relevant ones) app features - Be quick on conveying your app's value

While the user journey is mapped based on the persona and JTBD, highlighting the critical and relevant app features that offer the most value to users early in the onboarding journey takes users to the 'aha moment' much faster. If it takes too long for users to find the value the app offers, they're likely to drop off/churn out.

The point where most brands falter is when they show every feature (even those that may not be remotely relevant to the user) during the onboarding journey. This cognitive overload that comes by introducing too many features at one go, overwhelms users and leaves them utterly confused on what feature to explore or what to click on next. This becomes a major friction point where the user's intent to uninstall the app is highest.

Long story short, the onboarding journey should focus on introducing only those features that are absolutely critical for users to get started and work their way through the app seamlessly.

3. Identify and build habit loops right from the start

Nir Eyal, author of the best-selling book - Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products, talks about how some of the most successful products have been built by tapping deep into user behavior and creating strong habit loops that keep users coming back to the app.

You need to identify the key habit loops of your app. For instance, if you have a gaming app, collecting daily rewards would be one of the core

tenets around which you want to form user habits. For social media apps, it would be the whole circle of post, like, share and comment.

Onboarding is the first step in forming these user habits. Let's talk more about how the infamous 'hook model' fits into the onboarding process.
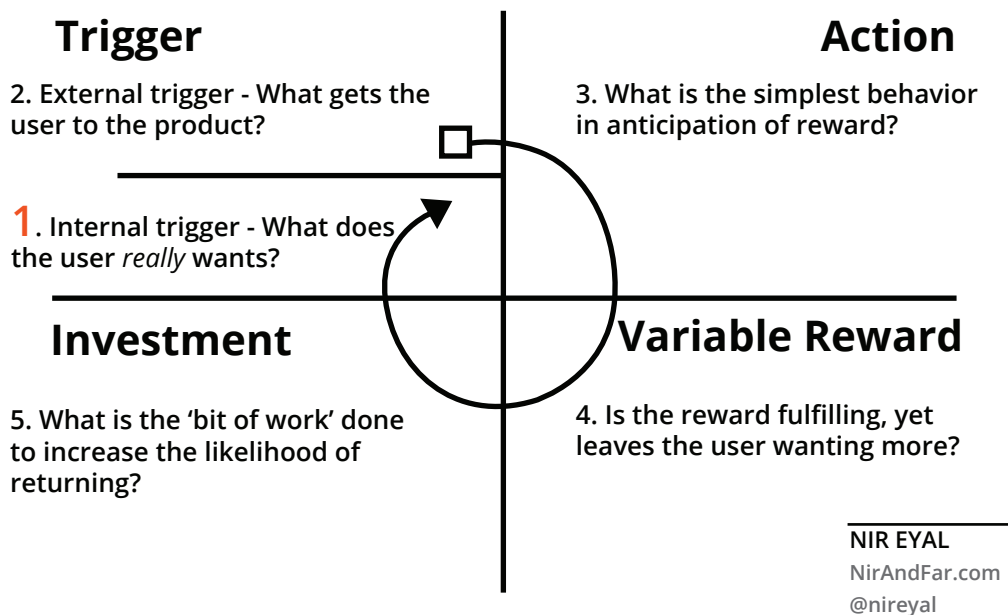
Trigger

2. External trigger - What gets the user to the product?

1. Internal trigger - What does the user *really* wants?

Investment

5. What is the 'bit of work' done to increase the likelihood of returning?

Action

3. What is the simplest behavior in anticipation of reward?

Variable Reward

4. Is the reward fulfilling, yet leaves the user wanting more?

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Image Source: https://www.nirandfar.com/how-to-trigger-product-usage-that-sticks/

It starts with a trigger that's a user's source of motivation to do something. It's best when it's related to some existing user habit but with a different set of actions associated with it. The trigger essentially conveys what your app is all about. The next step is to induce some desired set of actions from the user where you inform the user on how to use the app.

Then there's the set of rewards that drives a user to take repeated actions and lastly, there's the investment in terms of the effort a user takes to perform the given actions on the app.

An important point to note here is that, while most brands would think of

reducing the effort a user needs to put in to fully utilize the app, that might not always hold true. Especially when users simply focus on swiping screens instead of focusing on the 'know-how' of the app. Having said that, not every step in the onboarding process needs to be done time and again. But fitting these 4 elements into the onboarding journey helps apps monetize upon the users 'high-intent' moment, get started in the right way, and build user behaviors that become a part of their everyday workflow.

To know more, read this:
https://www.nirandfar.com/thisisyourbrainonboarding/

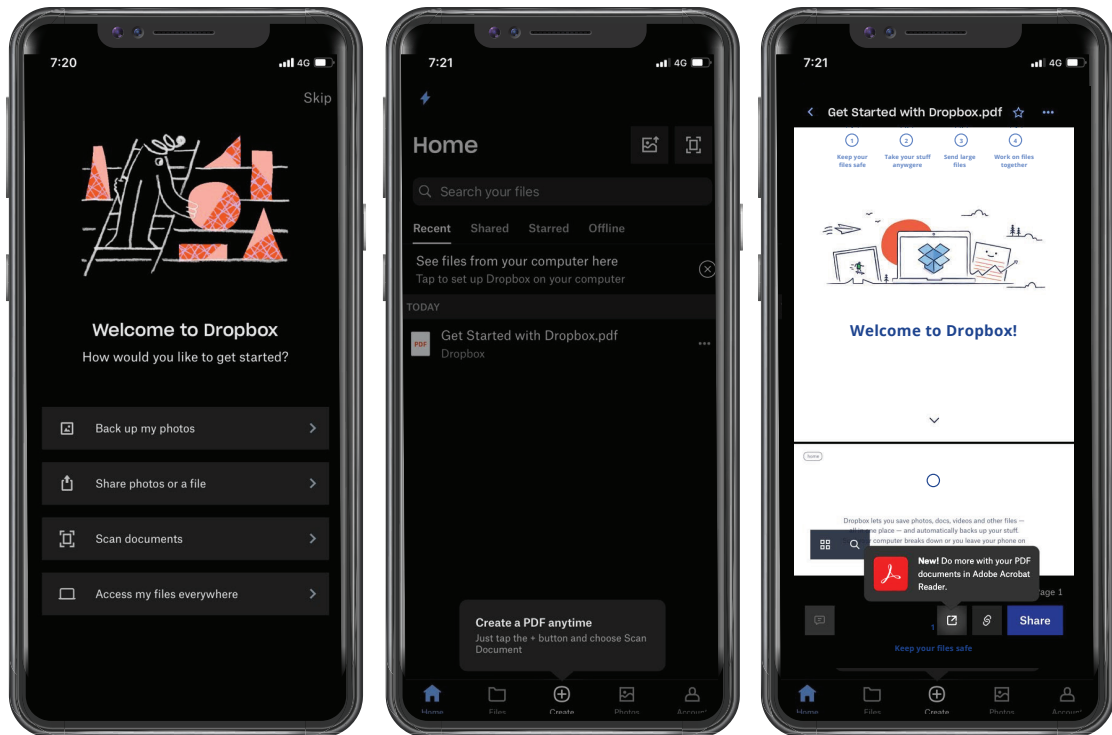## 4. Deploy nudges & walkthroughs - Tooltips, spotlight, beacons, and more

Contextually placing nudges & walkthroughs help users navigate through the critical steps on the app and guides them to the desired value without interfering with the overall users' flow and experience throughout the onboarding journey.

Product tours in the form of a series of tooltips, work exceptionally well in walking users through the key app features.

Spotlights again are extremely effective in grabbing a user's attention to introduce critical features on the app.

The right combination of nudges, targeted at different user cohorts helps in drafting unique onboarding experiences, increasing activation, and ensuring a smooth onboarding experience throughout. Customer favorite brands like Google, Slack, Dropbox, and many more have been successfully leveraging nudges across their apps to engage and retain users on Day 0 and beyond.

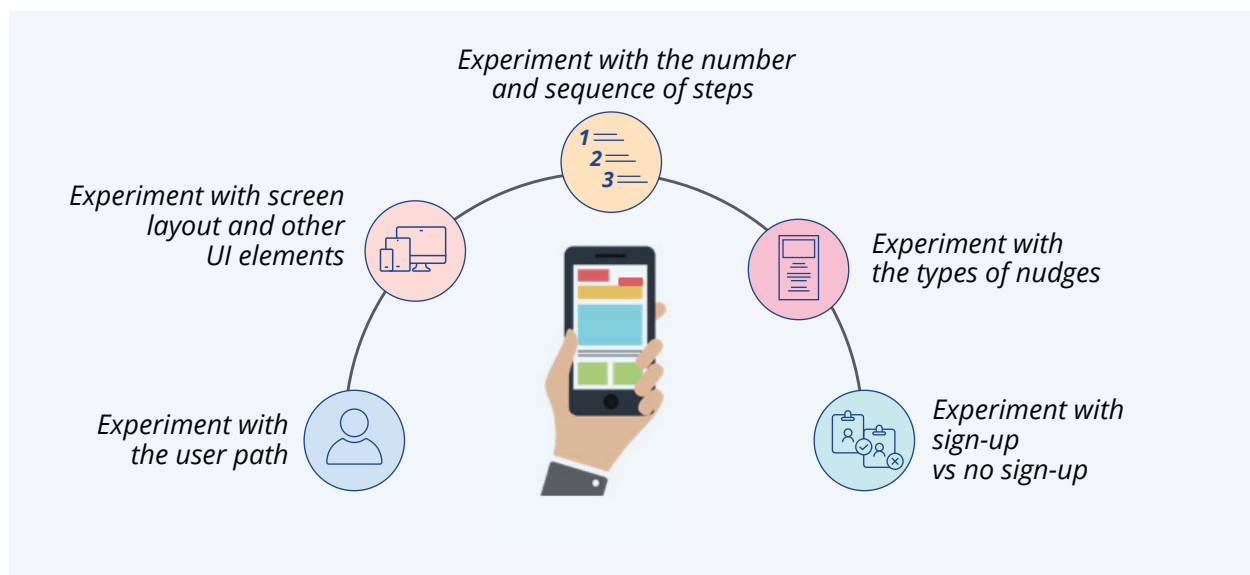Here's how Dropbox crafts it's onboarding experience for first time users.

Depending upon the set of actions/what the user clicks on, a series of nudges are triggered to introduce features that are relevant to the user's context.

And, deploying nudges & walkthrough is as easy as it reads. With the ongoing low-code/no-code revolution, these can be implemented without having to write a single line of code and zero dependencies on developers. Product Managers can now fully orchestrate their app user's onboarding journey to ace the metrics that matter the most.

Related read: App Walkthrough - The How, Why, What and Everything in Between

5. Indulge in rapid experimentation

Experiments can be conducted for the number of steps involved in the onboarding process, sequence of the steps, the types of nudges, information revealed to users, tutorial vs no tutorials, UI designs, sign up or no sign up depending upon the purpose of your app and the all the other important aspects that surround the onboarding process.

Experiment with the number and sequence of steps

Experiment with screen layout and other UI elements

Experiment with the types of nudges

Experiment with the user path

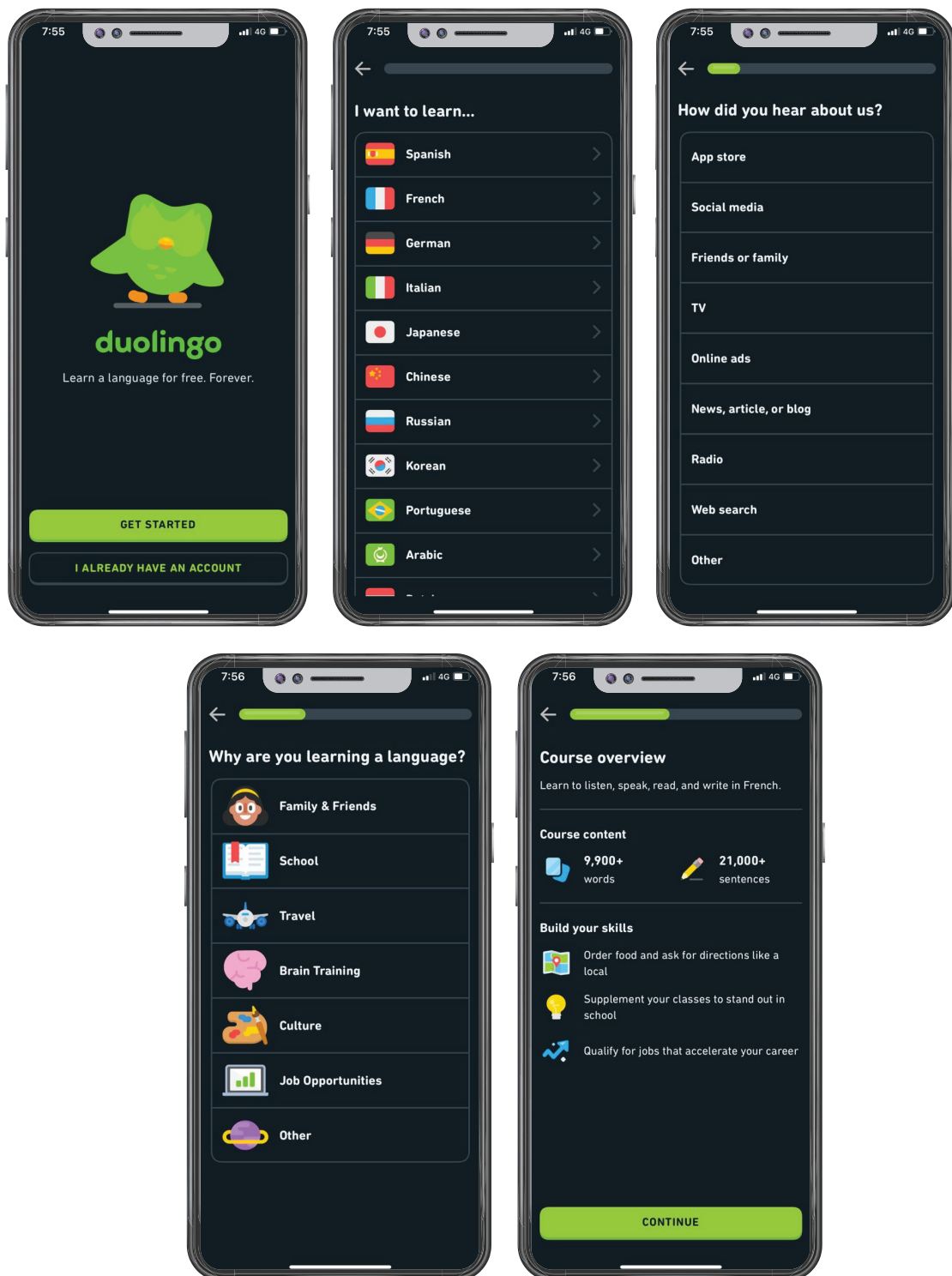Experiment with sign-up vs no sign-up

User behavior is definitely difficult to predict. Hence, a data-driven approach to onboarding is much needed to understand which kind of onboarding creates engaging experiences and the ones that lead to users uninstalling the app. Deploy A/B testing for micro-segments and know what's working and not working.

The more you test, the more improved is the onboarding experience that will further drive app growth.

6. Personalization is a must

A one-size-fits-all outlook will certainly get you nowhere with your app growth. Personalization is not an option but an absolute must for every mobile app. Tailoring the whole onboarding experience to meet the unique expectations of your users drives faster user activation and reduces the time-to-value. While the concept of personalization is well-known, are you actually implementing it across your onboarding journey? We don't mean a simple 'Hey {First Name}'. There's a lot more you can do to personalize the onboarding journey, starting with asking users for the goals they want to achieve.

Duolingo uncovers the user's reason for learning a new language and helps them set up language goals by asking a few questions. Based on the user's choice of language, knowledge, and goals, useful features are introduced to deliver an experience better suited to meet the user's goals.
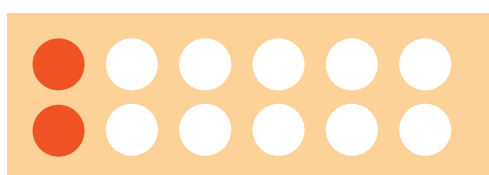
Spotify asks users to choose their favorite music genres. Netflix and Amazon Prime do the same with their movie genres to show personalized recommendations to keep up the momentum of users throughout their journey.

Instead of following a random feature introduction strategy, the focus should be on gathering user data and understanding the proficiency levels of users while using the app, to deliver a tailored product experience.
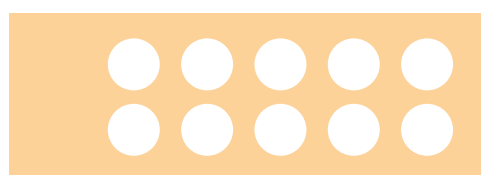
7. Allow users to keep a track of their progress

A better understanding of the user psychology that goes behind decision-making plays an important role in creating powerful onboarding experiences that make users stick to your app. **The goal gradient effect** - one of those many psychological hacks suggests that the more the users see their progress towards a goal, the more they're determined to finish off the tasks.

Illusion of progress is motivating!

| 12 Stamp card with 2 pre-completed stamp | 10 Stamp card with no pre-completed stamp |

Image Source: https://www.appinessworld.com/blogs/214/what-is-goal-gradient-effect-and-how-can-you-apply-its-principles-in-ux
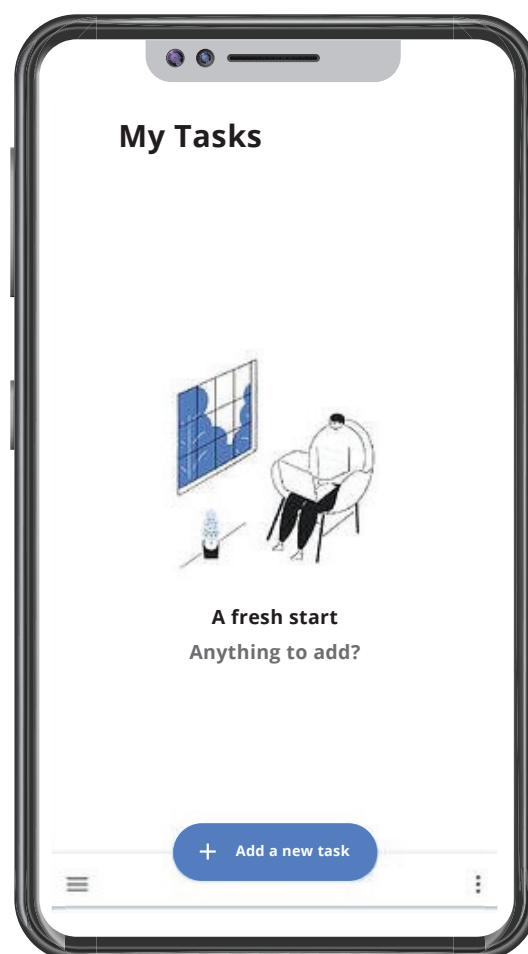
Progress bars and checklists leverage this user tendency to drive them towards onboarding completion. When users exactly know what to expect, they're more likely to complete the tasks.

Yet again Duolingo sets an amazing example for this.

To know more about how behavioral science plays a major role in onboarding, *here's a blog piece for you: Behavioral Science: 5 princi-ples to improve your app onboarding experiences - Netcore*

8 Use empty states

Many apps show a blank screen for new users since they haven't taken any action on the app. These app screens require users to perform some actions that would reflect some content on these blank screens -

The empty states can be put to use for guiding and educating users to take action. Leaving users with some information on these empty states encourages users to take some action and further engage with the app.

You have to go beyond simply stating what and why these empty states are there on the app. Users need a clear direction on the steps they need to take to fill it. Ideally, these empty states are the starting point for users to engage in critical app activities. Just like every other UI/UX elements, empty states need to be designed to delight users right from their first interaction.

To learn more about empty state strategies, read this blog piece - 5 'Empty State' Strategies to Drive Engagement | by Hansel.io | Medium

9. Remove potential drop-off/friction points

Think like a user. Would you sign up for an app that asks you to fill 10 fields in the very first interaction? I wouldn't!

An app launch is not an indication of prospects being convinced about your app's value. They're interested, sure, but certainly not bought in yet. So, to help prospects cross the chasm from first-time to lifetime users, it's critical to eliminate the roadblocks on this path, a complex sign-up being one of them. For instance, a multi-channel verification process doesn't count as a very pleasant experience.

Another onboarding killer is apps asking for your card details. Yes, they might not be charging you initially but even in a free trial version, asking for card details might not be the smart thing to do. Users don't want to commit to the app at such an early stage when they're still evaluating the app's value.

You need to identify all those pitfalls where a user could drop off and stick to asking only for those bits of information that are mandatory for users to successfully use the app.

So, give your users a chance to experience the product before asking too much, and make the whole onboarding journey friction-free.

10. Less is more - Go easy on the number of steps

This is also what the bowling alley framework emphasizes. In the game of bowling, you need to roll the ball in a straight line to hit the bullseye (strike-out) - something you can apply to the onboarding journey. One of the most important parts of this framework is straight-line onboarding.
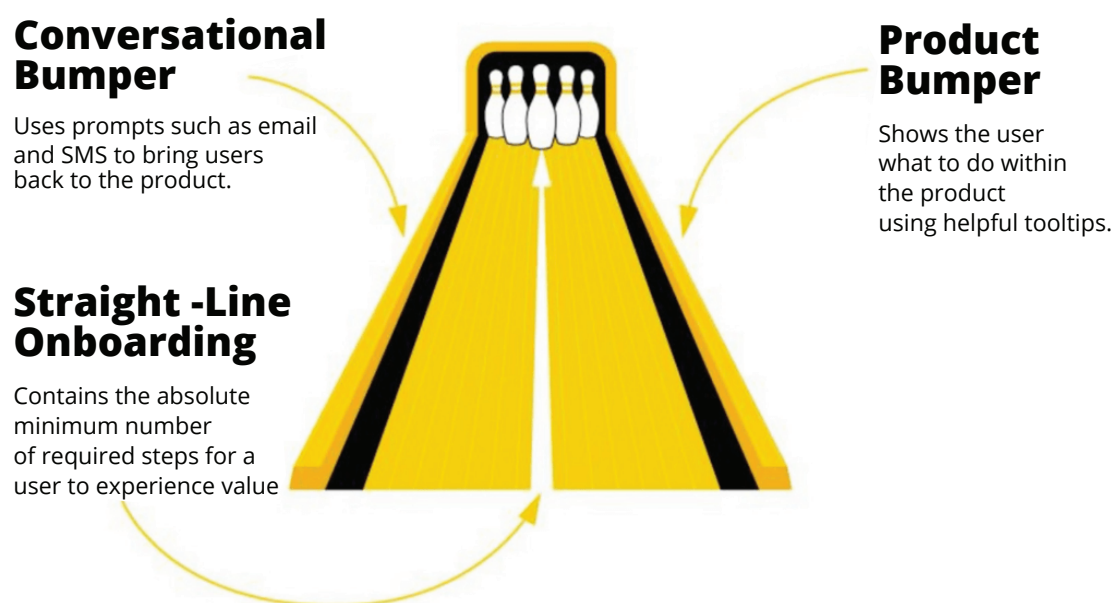
Conversational Bumper

Uses prompts such as email and SMS to bring users back to the product.

Product Bumper

Shows the user what to do within the product using helpful tooltips.

Straight -Line Onboarding

Contains the absolute minimum number of required steps for a user to experience value

Image Source: https://www.productboard.com/blog/wes-bush-product-onboarding-framework/

Ask yourself, what are the critical steps? Which are the ones that can be eliminated? Which of them can be delayed and shown at a later stage as users explore the app? Identifying the straight-line of your app is crucial for a compelling onboarding experience.

11. Have an opt-out option, always

Every user appreciates the choice given to opt-out from the onboarding process. At times, app users like to discover the app by themselves. When users opt-out from the onboarding, you should guide them as and when they navigate through the app. Depending upon the actions the user takes, you elevate the next best action/step by using subtle nudges that let users continue using the app while also guiding them in the right direction.

Final Thoughts

A common theme that bleeds into all these best practices is that of a product-led growth approach. Every point in this checklist breathes long-term app growth with the product taking the front seat and keeps the product experience at the heart of every strategy. This is what a product-led growth strategy in action looks like.

Onboarding is undisputedly the first and a substantially important step in implementing a product-led strategy. If these are already on your onboarding checklist (if not, you need to prioritize them now) you're on a great start to lead product-led strategy for your app.

So, how many of these have you checked off yet?

And while you're at it, Netcore's Product Experience platform can help you build amazing on-boarding experiences with zero development and engineering efforts.

Deploying no-code contextual nudges & walkthroughs right from Day 0 helps create a seamless first-time experience for users, navigate them through critical app features, drive faster user activation, and help users realize the app value at the start.

To know more about Netcore Product Experience, connect with us!

Why Choose Netcore for Product Experience