How Flo Health Reached the Top:

Promoting In-App Purchases to Dominate your Category on the App Store

It's not easy to stay competitive as an app, let alone dominate your category. ASO is a key component of obtaining a market reach that acquires enough users to provide sufficient growth. ASO has become a commonplace practice for the large majority of well-performing apps in the ecosystem. Another important but often overlooked element of store optimization is improving creatives and texts of your in-app purchases.

70% of app users use Search to find new apps — it's more effective than any other form of acquiring users, including from word of mouth. But the struggle for time in the spotlight on the app stores is only getting fiercer & more complex. With over 5 million apps worldwide, the competition to make it to the top is becoming more and more difficult. In some categories, there are already players who are well established as industry leaders.

Let's say your app has excelled with traditional ASO and paid user acquisition. That's certainly a commendable achievement. However, the next challenge is to win against other strong players in the visibility game in Search results.

This whitepaper will explain how to use the in-app purchases to enhance your search visibility further. One of AppFollow's clients, Flo Health — the leading female health & wellbeing app helping millions of women and girls worldwide manage their menstrual cycle — used this method to get to the top of the Apple App Store. We will use their success story to explore how you can apply it to your business.

In-app purchases on the App Store: what are they?

In-app purchases are the commerce mechanism for the app stores, and include content, subscriptions, or other types of purchases. An app can have up to 20 in-app purchases. There are three types of in-app purchases: subscriptions, consumables, and non-consumables. What's interesting is that each in-app purchase can be promoted. Promoted in-apps can appear on your product page, be visible in search results, and get featured on the Today, Games, and Apps tabs. They have their own metadata on the App Store, including a promotional image, a display name, and a description.

When Apple reviews your app after a new version is uploaded for App Store approval, in-app options are reviewed separately from this review process. It's important to point out that no notification is sent to the team upon the approval of an in-app review. This means it's up to the ASO manager to check the App Store every day to monitor approval of in-app promotions. Please note that Apple is often triggered to approve updates after a pricing change from the app, but if you have a dedicated Apple Account Representative, you can contact them to speed up this process.
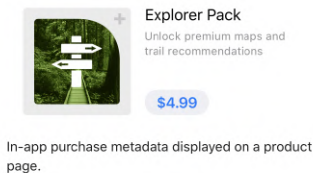
In-app purchase metadata displayed on a product page.
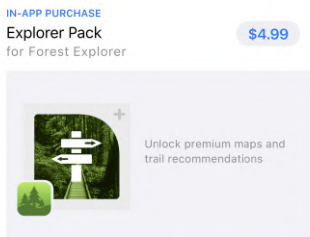
In-app purchase metadata displayed in search results, Today, Games, and Apps tabs.
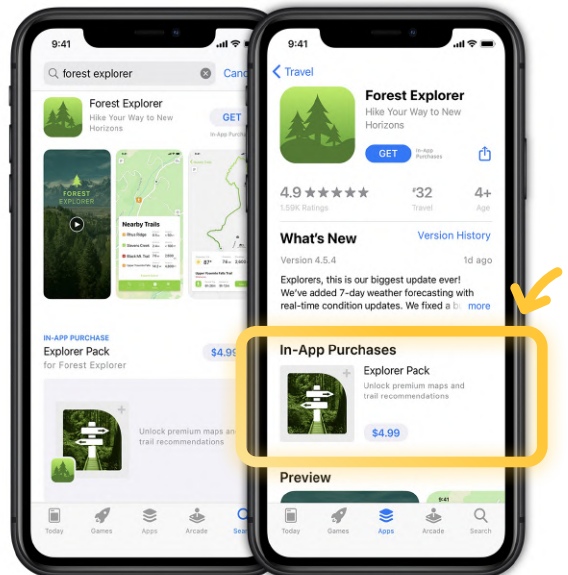
# Optimizing in-app content for user acquisition growth

Text metadata

This consists of an in-app purchase's name and description.

The name can contain up to 30 characters and is indexed by the App Store algorithm. The description of the in-app should explain the nature of the purchase and distinguish it from any others. It contains up to 45 characters.

It's important to remember that the display name should explain clearly to a visitor what he is purchasing. Avoid any generic wording and ensure that it's associated with the app. Similarly, in-app descriptions should be straight to the point on what the purchase is about.

The key to optimization for text metadata is combining relevant keywords in both the in-app title and description. Use long-tail keywords, which increase your chances to rank in multiple search results.

To make sure this optimization is successful, your ASO team needs to be constantly measuring and iterating. This improvement process can be visualized as so:

Measure

Optimize

Analyze

Repeat
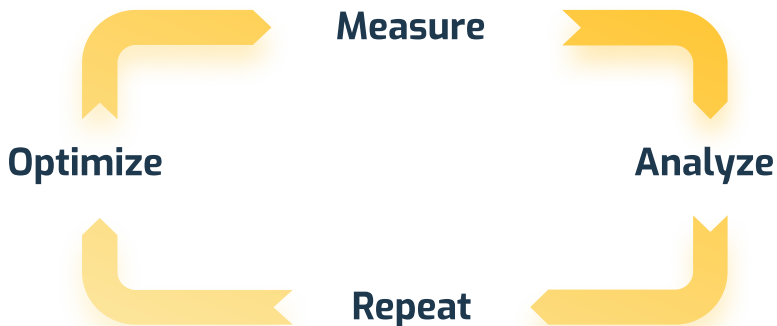
In-app Purchases Promotional Images

Before deciding on the design of promotional images for your in-app purchases (IAP) you should perform a competitor analysis. The reason for this is that your in-app promotion will be shown in the search results alongside your competitors and it's important to find a distinction for your design. The promotional image for the in-app purchase needs to be consistent with the app icon and the first 3 screens, but not exactly or thematically the same.

You must remember that for an in-app icon design:

1. Do not use a screenshot for the promotional image, the image is quite small, so make sure not to include too many small details.

2. Don't use your app icon — this is already displayed in the lower left hand corner and repetition doesn't look good.

3. Create an icon with the value proposition of the in-app in mind.

4. Do not use text inside the icon — instead, focus on making it attractive, bold and clear.

5. Take into account the Store framework for in-apps when creating your icon: a plus sign will be added to the upper right corner, and the image itself will be slightly cropped.

6. The App Store Guidelines also do not recommend using text in the image.

Flo Health followed these best practices with their successful in-app icons:

Before

Competitors

After

You can see that the after icons present what value the in-app purchases will provide the user much more clearly, are distinctly designed from competitors and are much more attractive to an eye.

Flo Health's in-app optimization story

The hypothesis

The Flo team had found themselves as a leader in the app store for their niche. Yet, becoming number one was a hugely challenging step. So, the team came up with a new hypothesis to achieve this objective — optimizing their in-app promotions would push competitors to lower positions in the search results. They believed that:

1. **Keyword optimization** of in-apps would show their in-app promotions in more search queries, making competitors less visible in the search results.

2. **Icon optimization** would draw more users in, increasing conversion rate of promoted in-apps.

The strategy

To prove the hypothesis, the team needed to put it to the test. To do this, they developed a five-step strategy that would help them execute it well and be the most likely to produce the results they were hoping for.

Step 1: Research

The components of this research are competitor and success case analysis. The Flo team needed to know how their competitors were performing in terms of in-apps positioning for keywords & traffic (for both Search & Browse). What was being done well, what was missing? And those apps in the App Store which have succeeded in dominating top positions in search results, what did they do to achieve this? The Flo team focused on analyzing in their research on three elements: promotional images, their display names, and descriptions.

Step 2: Ideation & Design

Flo collected a selection of competitors' in-app purchases promotional images. They then presented these to the designer for reference when making the new icons. The result was the creation of distinct, eye-catching and original designs — that included fresh graphics & people — and was unlike anything else out there on the App Store. Furthermore, it clearly presented the value of what the in-app purchase provided.

Step 3: Implement

The next thing the team did was performing extensive keyword research for in-app metadata using AppFollow. They prioritized long-tail keywords in their search and then added keywords in the names and descriptions on the in-app purchases. They needed to fit the semantic core — the most valuable keywords for the app — into display names and descriptions for In-app purchases without cramming them into a meaningless sequence of keywords (which you can be penalized for).

Step 4: Upload

The Flo team wanted a clean result, with cause and effect clearly shown in the data. So, they decided to upload their changes to the in-app metadata incrementally. They uploaded the new in-app metadata on the 3rd of September and the new icons on the 8th of September.

Step 5: Analyze

The moment of truth. The Flo team waited ten days to let enough data come in and then checked AppFollow's visibility analysis tool to see the impact of the changes. They clearly could see that the results had a hugely positive impact on the ranking of their in-app purchases and the app itself.

In-app optimization strategy

01 Research

Collect as much as possible on competitor optimization and the state of in-app promotion in the category, including badly executed ones and success cases

02 Design

Using research as a reference, designers created unique icons for the inn-app promotions that distinguished Flo from competitors

03 Implement

Inputting a selection of longtail keywords found using AppFollow into a Google sheet with the in-app title and descriptions

04 Upload

Updated the App Store incrementally so as to see cause and effect of improvement clearly
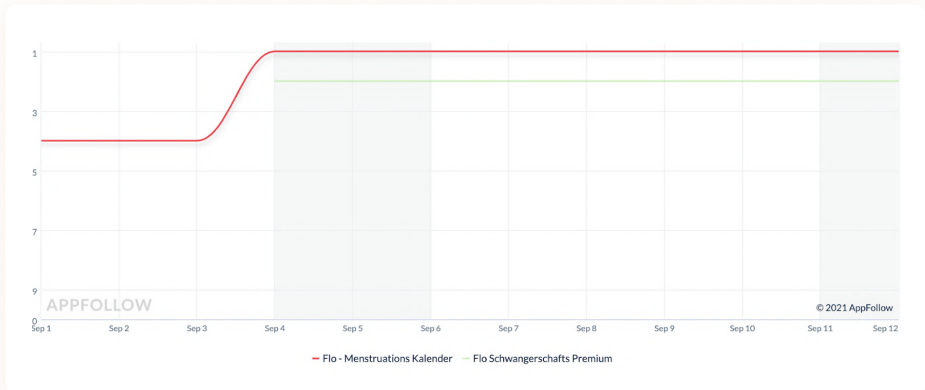
05 Analyze

Check results ten days later. Looked for visible growth in position regarding keyworlds

The outcome

The Flo team saw a positive change in position of the app (red line) for the "Menstruations Kalender" (DE) keyword within a day of changing text metadata, as shown in the graph below. Also, the in-app appeared in the search results (green line).

🇩🇪 Deutschland

The change was made on September 3rd and on that day the Flo app ranking for the "Menstruations Kalender" went from 4th to 1st position on the App Store. This shows a significant impact of the change on App Store ranking and a huge success for the Flo app in getting to the top in search results.

The same results can be seen in Brazil: after updating keywords in name & description, the Flo app moved from 3rd to 1st position and their in-app purchase started indexing.

Rank History for **ciclo menstrual calendario**

Top 10 apps for **ciclo mens...** ↺ Reset
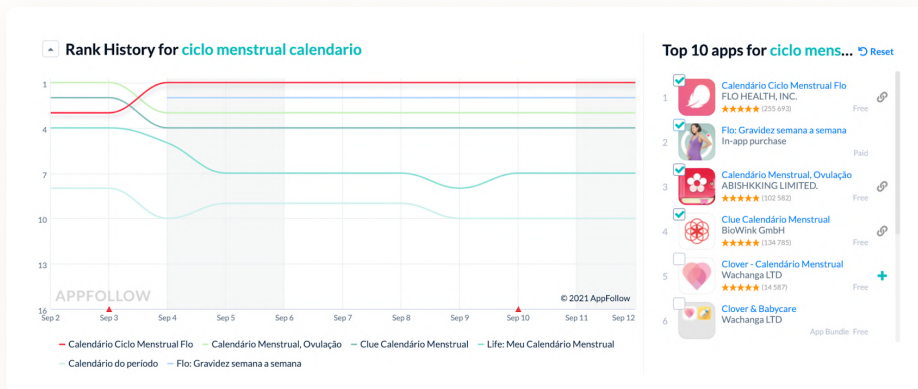
🇧🇷 Brazil

Icons and in-app texts were updated in 6 countries — the United States, Mexico, Brazil, France, Germany, and Russia. Graphs above have shown that in ten days after changes the Flo app dominated in first position, and the second position was occupied by their in-app promotions. Similar results were visible for other keywords as well, which effectively enabled the Flo ASO team to push out its competitors from the top 3 spots for numerous keywords and countries.

Improvements to positions in search results for Flo's in-app purchases

🇩🇪 Deutschland

One keyword went up **2 positions in search results** — the in-app achieving 2nd place

Three keywords went up **3 positions in search results** — the in-app achieving 2nd and 3rd place

One keyword went up **4 positions in search results** — the in-app achieving 2nd place

One keyword went up **6 positions in search results** — the in-app achieving 3rd place

🇺🇸 United States

One keyword went up **1 positions in search results** — the in-app achieving 2nd place

🇫🇷 France

Two keywords went up **2 positions in search results** — the in-app achieving 2nd place

One keyword went up **1 positions in search results** — the in-app achieving 2nd place

🇧🇷 Brazil

One keyword went up **2 positions in search results** — the in-app achieving 2nd place

This gave Flo an incredible amount of visibility and they found themselves occupying the search results screen after replacing their competitors for the targeted keywords. You can see the ripple effect of this on both search visibility and downloads.

1. Search Visibility Score:

The way AppFollow measures this is by using all the keywords the app ranks for, with the highest popularity and highest positions. More top 10 positions that an app achieves, the better its Search Visibility Score will be.

Flo saw a significant bump in this metric after they changed the in-app metadata on the 3rd of September. As you can see in the chart below, the score went from around 55k to 60k — +10% in just a day.
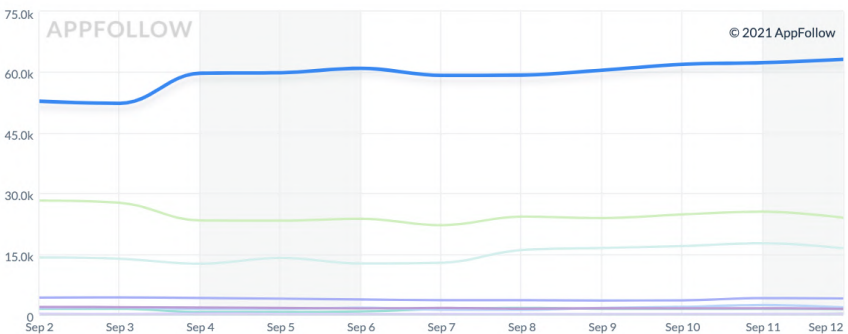
2. App Store Search Traffic:

The traffic from Search had two bumps across the week according to the changes made to the in-app promotion.

On the 3rd of September, as mentioned before, textual meta for in-apps were updated. The effect on downloads took a little longer than visibility, but by the 5th the traffic from Search went from under 900 to 1.2k — an approximate increase of 33% in just a few days.

The second bump was seen after the 10th of September — increasing 30% on the 12th. This was as a result of Flo's changes to the in-app icon.
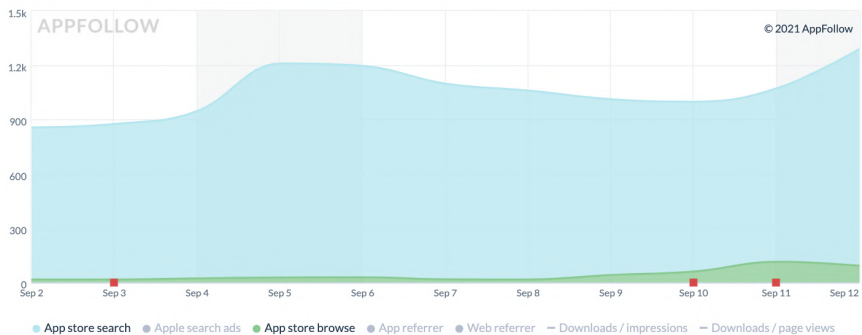
3. Traffic from Browse:

This was an encouraging bump to see for the team, too. After the in-app icon change on the 10th of September, the traffic from Browse grew by 50% in a day.

Why is this significant? Because it shows that Flo's success in getting further up in the Top Charts on the App Store using in-app promotions has had a noticeably positive effect, with more users finding them when browsing the App Store.

Why is Browse so important for future growth?

Getting more traffic from Browse means you are potentially reaching an audience outside of your initial target market. If you see an expansion in traffic from Browse, it's a sign that your app is now discoverable to a wider range & variety of users. Browse essentially allows you to reach more groups of users that would otherwise not have found your app. This is crucial for future growth because once you have exhausted a particular cohort of users, you will be able to reach a fresh group.

Flo's new learnings — key insights & takeaways

The strategy for in-app promotion that Flo executed was clearly a great success. But what were the key things the team discovered about the process, the need-to-knows, and best practices?

- It's more effective to choose keywords with lower or middle popularity for your in-apps promotions optimization strategy.

- Never copy the title of your app to in-apps' names. It will not affect the outcome and just seem repetitive or boring to users.

- Once the changes have been uploaded onto the App Store you will need to wait between seven to ten days before analyzing the results. Once this time is up, see if the changes have had any impact on your traffic or keyword rankings. If they didn't, try something new and iterate a recent optimization.

- ASO doesn't work in a day, it can time and is always a work in progress!

- For more clear results, update your in-app texts and icon separately within days of one another.

- Well optimized in-app promotion metadata can have a positive impact on the visibility of your app as they can help push down competitors in search results.

More resources:

developer.apple.com/app-store/promoting-in-app-purchases

help.apple.com/app-store-connect/#/dev84b80958f

Related article in our blog:

appfollow.io/blog/advanced-app-store-optimization-how-to-use-in-app-purchases-to-gain-more-app-visibility

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