A Complete Guide to ASO (App Store Optimization)

By Craig Weinberg, VP of Mobile Strategy, 3Q Digital, and Gary Yentin, CEO and Founder, AppPromo

Do you remember how you found your last app? More likely than not, you searched for it, and you probably searched an App Store.

In October 2014, a study from TUNE found that App Store search remains the biggest driver of app discovery, accounting for roughly half of new app installs on both iOS and Android. The data has likely shifted since then, but rest assured that app store discovery is a critical lever in the mobile game.

The bad news: app store discovery is not easy: on both Google Play and iTunes, there are over 1.4 apps clamoring for your attention.

The good news: app store optimization (ASO) best practices aren't yet widespread; chances are, there's room to gain a significant edge on your competition if you put into play the insights we'll break down in this whitepaper. Much like SEO but not nearly as mature, ASO is a gradual gain that, when done correctly, can afford your app a higher natural/organic rank in the Google Play and iTunes stores and better overall discoverability for new and existing users.

This whitepaper breaks down the important universal, and SEO-like, elements to ASO. We'll also review Google Play and iTunes – the two main players in the App Store game – and how optimization varies for each. Unlike SEO, where optimizing for Google (more and more synonymous with optimizing for the user) is the name of the game, app store optimization requires different strategies for each platform, and we'll go into those below.

Let's get started.

Optimizing Key Words, Meta Data, and Tags

Keywords, titles, and meta descriptions are the foundation to ASO (this should sound familiar to SEO veterans).

A few quick tactics:

- Search app stores to **identify marketable keywords** and then incorporate them into **app titles** (like "bike race," below).
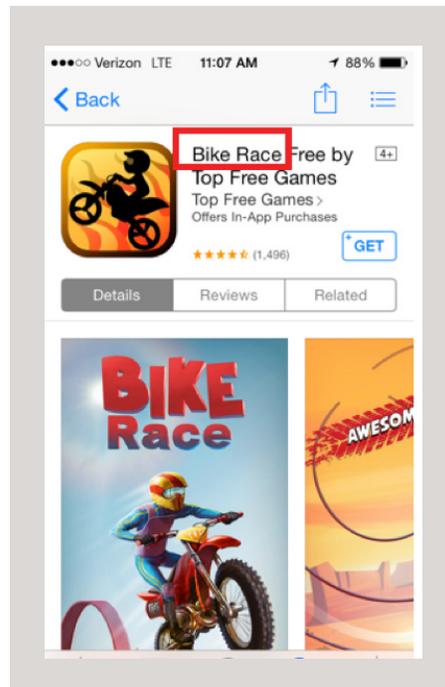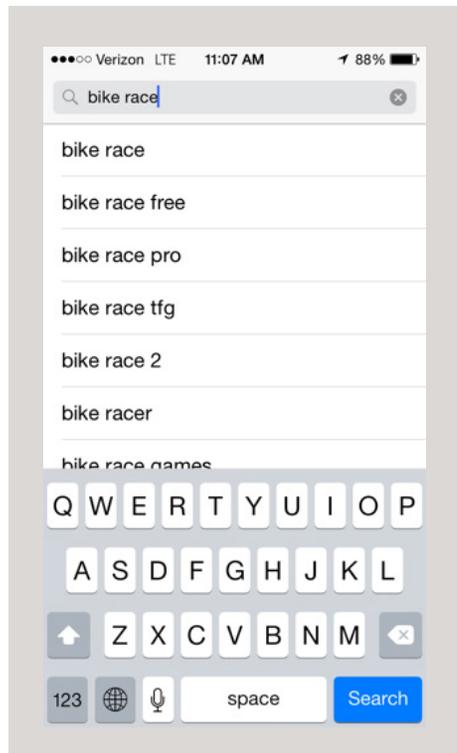
- Avoid **competitive** and **genetic** keywords.

- As with hashtags on Twitter, don't force them or overuse keywords.

- Draft titles and descriptions that sound natural and **differentiate the app** from others. Test different descriptions and titles over time to optimize the right mix of descriptors for your app store listing.

- If a new **app works** in **conjunction with another**, consider including the **name of the second app in the title field of the other one.**

- Keep your app descriptions short and clean. Explain in the first 1-2 lines what your app does and why it's unique (but refrain from bragging).

Examples of good app descriptions:
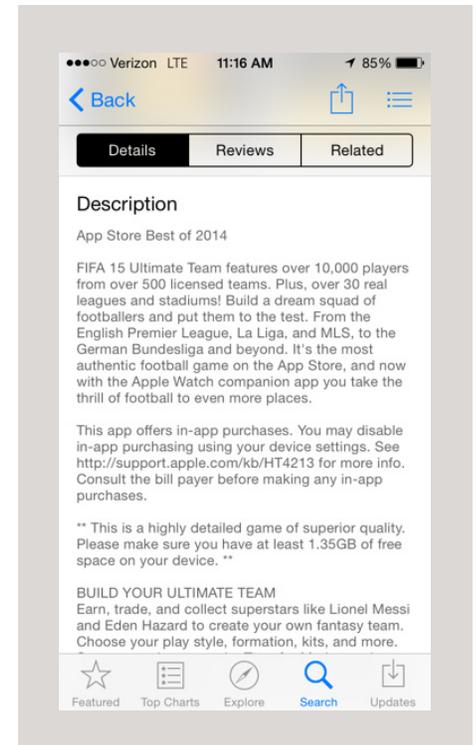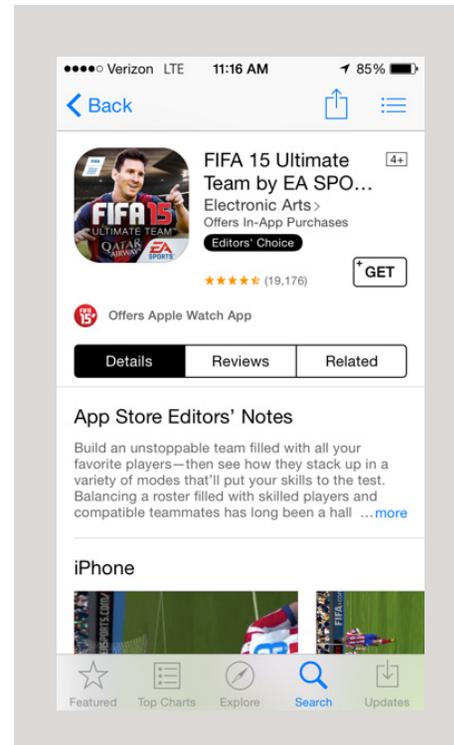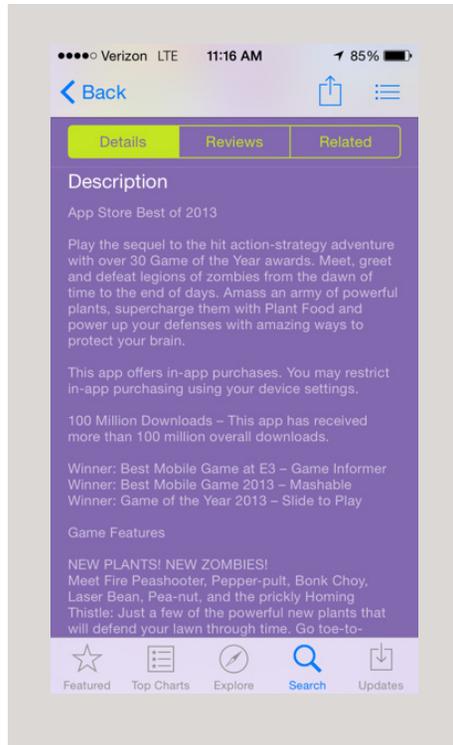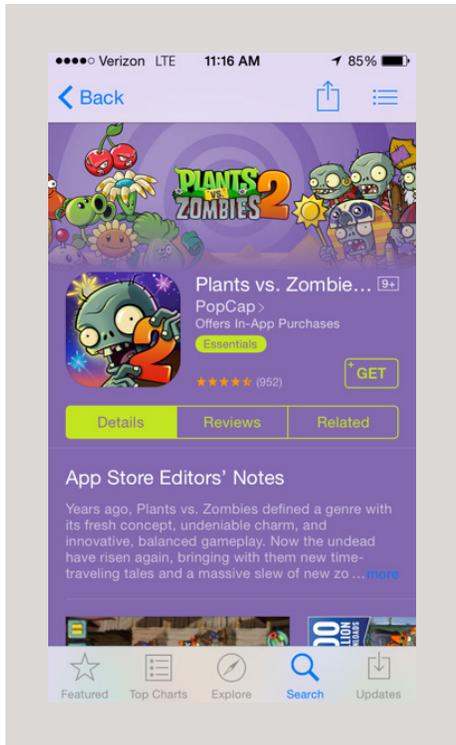
Optimizing Icons

Visuals are another big component of app discovery; good visuals help turn eyeballs into clicks, downloads, and installs. Here are a few key points:

- Don't use words; users can read your app description. Imagery is the best way to first capture a user's attention in the app store.

- Don't use standard gloss.

- Keep the icon simple, clean, and consistent with your app imagery.

Individual app store listing (this is Airbnb's):
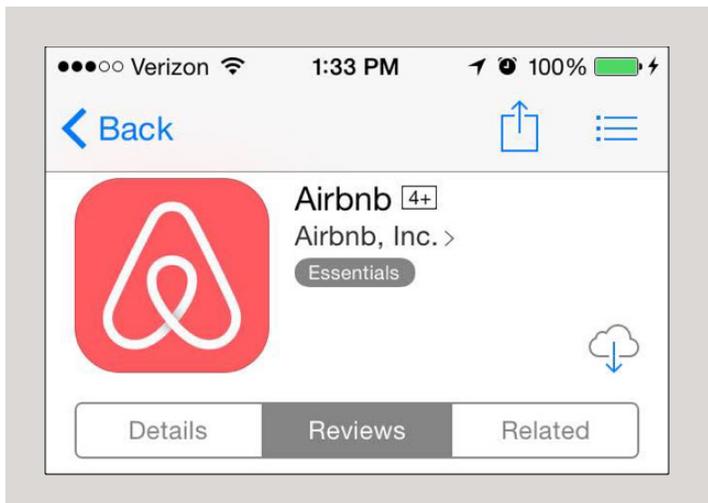
iTunes' 'Featured' Section:
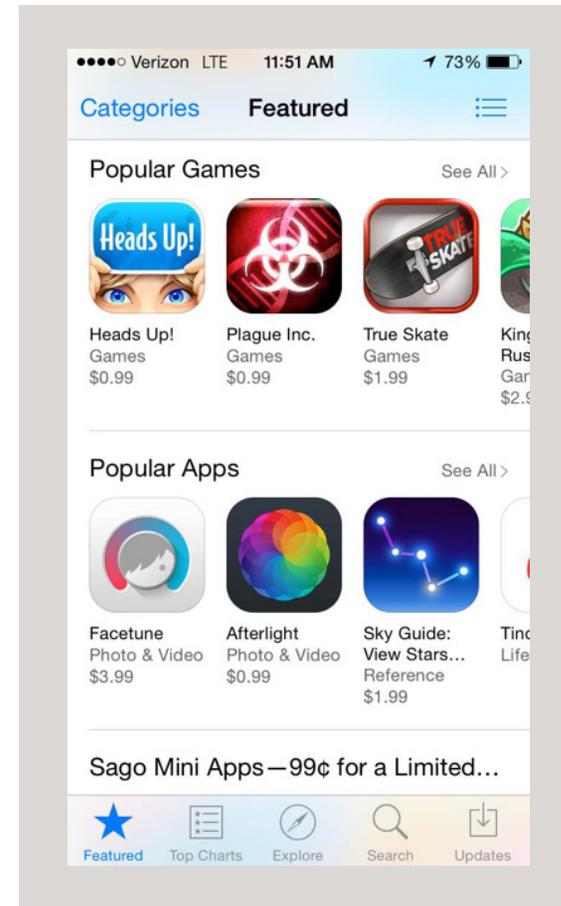
Optimizing Screenshots

The app store is highly visual; screenshots of your app (used in your app store listing and often repurposed in social media install ads or banner ads) are the user's intro to your app's experience and capabilities. Screenshots of your app in action can be effective if you use a few best practices:

- Don't just settle for a plain image; include concise copywriting calling out benefits or desired actions.

- Treat your screenshots like a stop-motion commercial.

Jet does a great job of concisely telling its app's main value prop – a streamlined and value-driven shopping experience – through its screenshots:
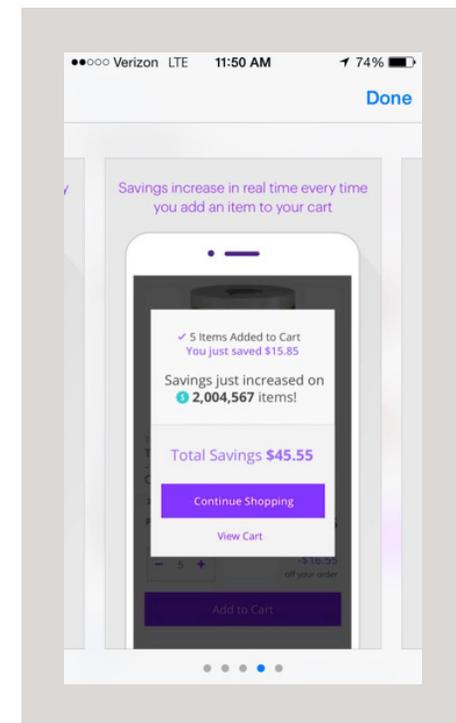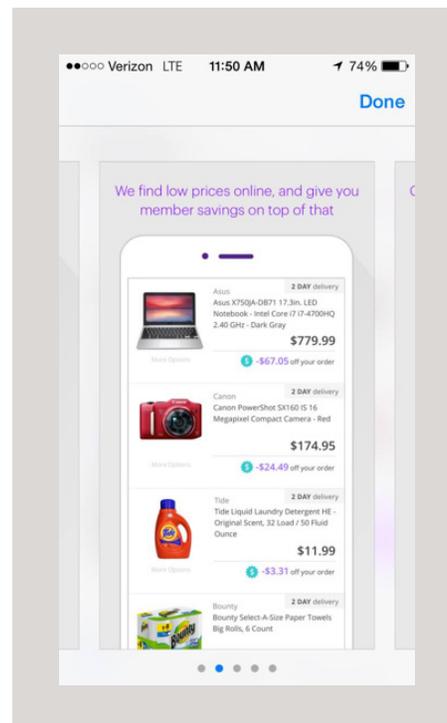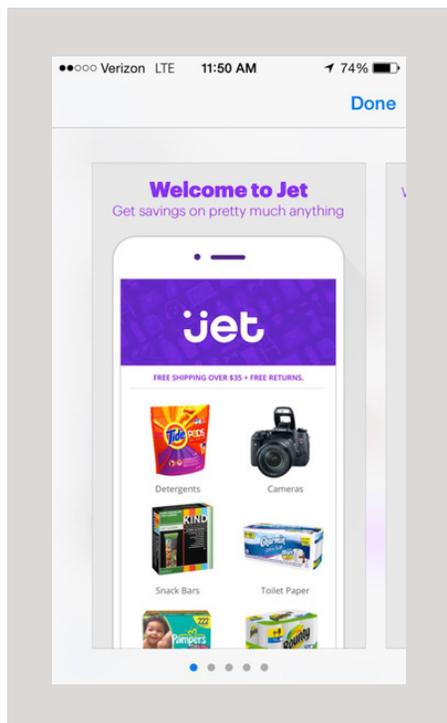
Optimizing Google's Play Store vs. Apple's iTunes

If you've been paying attention to mobile at all, you already know the two main app store platforms: Google and Apple.

Not surprisingly, Google's Play Store search functions more like its keyword-driven web search. As AppLift breaks down, Google's Play Store is highly driven by its semantic algorithm, whereas Apple's iTunes Store is driven more by phrases.

iTunes Apps can also be categorized in two categories, which gives your app a better chance at being discovered within the app ecosystem. Play Store apps can only belong to one category, and while this may narrow down your chances within the Play Store itself, it is important to understand that your app search results are related to and linked to your Google web search optimization. Link building, content, and a great product all help to buttress your Google listing.

Play Store Optimizations

The Google Play store specifically allows plenty of opportunity for optimization within its layout. If you check out the screenshot below, you'll see a couple of features you should utilize:

- Cross-promotion of your app portfolio (left-hand side)

- Use of valid backlinks to your app landing pages and social media pages (yellow arrow)

The layout works for both web and mobile view, but only the mobile view is clickable. It's important to note that you should also update the text regularly to keep your content fresh for both Google's search function and the user.
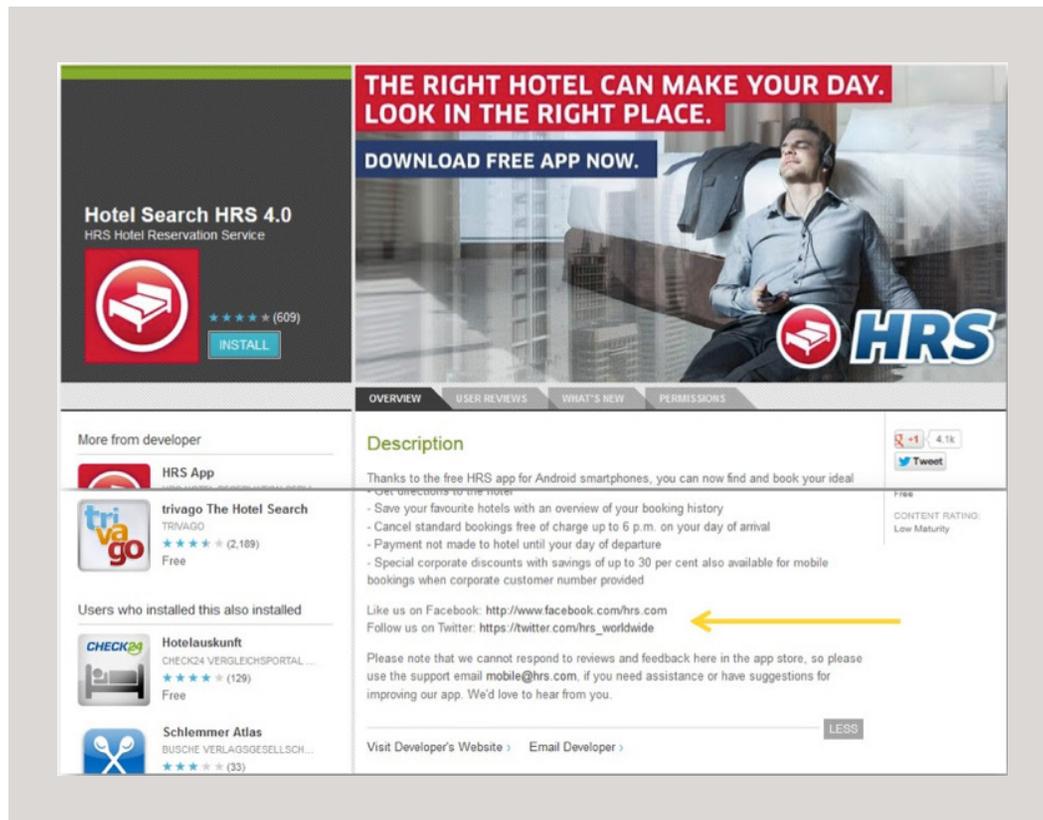
iTunes Optimizations

The iTunes Store also allows for plenty of optimization opportunities, just different and more nuanced than Google.

As AppLift explains, Apple's algorithm is more siloed to the iTunes store and is more rudimentary than Google's complex search functionality. Your iTunes app description does not influence the app store algorithm for ranking apps, which will take keywords from the field into account instead. But the description is important because it's indexed by Google's web search engine, so make sure to include relevant and high-volume keywords.

One more awesome contribution from AppLift is this handy iTunes/Google Play Store comparison chart:

	Apple App Store	Google Play Store
App Name	Heavy weight in the algorithm 255 characters max.	Heavy weight in the algorithm 30 characters max.
Publisher Name	Searchable	Searchable
Description	No impact in ASO but in SEO (iTunes App Page)	Taken into account by the algorithm
Keywords	100 characters Keywords Field	Scattered throughout
Screenshots	Up to 5	Up to 8
Video	App Preview: 15 - 30 sec long	Promo Video: YouTube video of 30 sec – 2min
Category	2 for apps / 3 for games	1 per app or game
In-App Purchases	Searchable	Searchable
Reviews & Ratings	Heavy weight in the algorithm	Heavy weight in the algorithm
Social Media Actions	/	Google +1
Promo Graphic	/	Optional
Feature Graphic	/	Optional

Importance of Ratings and Reviews

Ratings, which are seen by app store searchers, are critical indicators of your app's quality and act as social proof that can sway users to download. The more reviews, the better for your app store rankings and visibility.

Make sure to address reviews on a couple of fronts. First, ask for reviews from your users. Second, prompt users for feedback so they can convey any issues to you directly before posting a negative review.
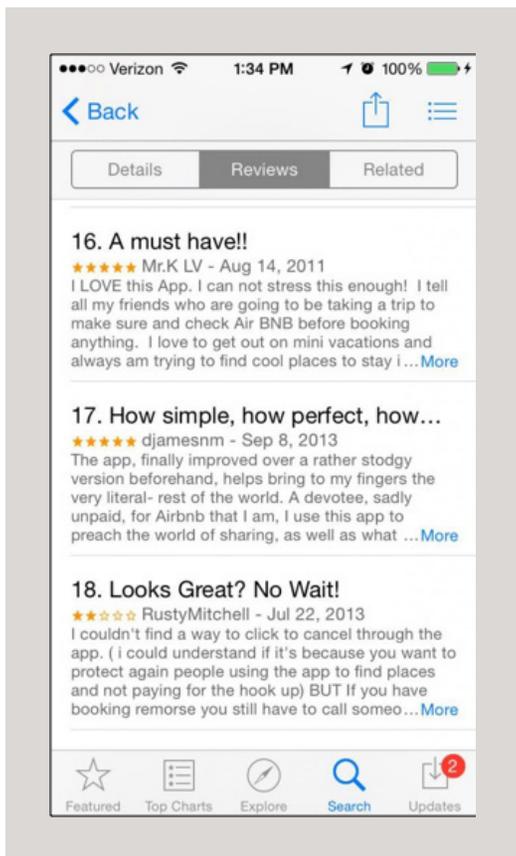
Conclusion

As we head further and further into an app-based mobile world, ASO is more than just a good idea; it's an absolute requirement for brands serious about moving their mobile needle. Follow the insights above, and you'll be off to a good start in standing out in an ever-bigger, ever-noisier crowd. Good luck!

About the Authors

Craig Weinberg joined 3Q after serving as Mobile Practice Lead at Mindshare, where he led mobile marketing across Mindshare's North American client portfolio. With experience in mobile marketing, media, content, strategy and business development, Craig provided mobile marketing, media planning, and buying for American Express, ampm, Land Rover, and CVS.

Prior to Mindshare, Craig was Mobile Strategy Manager at MediaVest, where he oversaw the mobile communications strategy within Proctor and Gamble's lead communications team. He also spent four years at Sony Music Entertainment, where he was responsible for mobile sales, distribution and marketing of Sony's Music's mobile content catalog.

Craig owns a strategic mobile consultancy, Savoy Mobile Inc., for which he advises mobile and ad-tech startups in product, growth, branding and partnership strategies. He is a frequent speaker on mobile topics at industry events. He lives on the Upper West Side with his wife, Ilana, and his baby girl, Mara. And he happens to be an unapologetic lifelong Philadelphia sports fan.

Gary Yentin is a senior mobile executive, with over 15 years of experience managing strategy sales, product, marketing, operations, and technology for established media entertainment, and technology companies. For the last 10 years Gary has focused on mobile technologies, including content development and distribution, having worked for m-Qube in the capacity of Vice President, and mobile advertising having worked with Admob (Google), Enpocket (Nokia), Quattro (Apple), and Jumptap.

For the last three years, Gary has focused on the business of mobile applications, discovery, distribution and monetization and is CEO and Founder of the award-winning agency AppPromo. AppPromo's mission is to assist developers on app engagement, retention, and monetization. Follow Gary @Apppromo or find him on LinkedIn.

About 3Q Digital

3Q Digital, a Harte Hanks company, believes clients deserve three things from a digital marketing agency: passionate service and complete transparency (EQ); channel-specific intelligence and knowledge (IQ) to develop new strategies as digital marketing evolves; and rock-solid execution (XQ) to ensure optimization of every campaign.

The company developed these beliefs as PPC Associates (2008-2013), which made its mark as a pioneering, results-oriented SEM agency before expanding to offer best-in-class services in display advertising, social media advertising, mobile advertising, video advertising, creative services, and SEO. 3Q Digital works with some of today's fastest-growing clients, including Square, Prosper, RelaxTheBack, SurveyMonkey, Fitbit, and Eventbrite.

If you're interested in learning more about 3Q Digital's services, please call us at 650 539-4625 or visit http://www.3QDigital.com/contact/. 3Q Digital is based in Silicon Valley and has offices in San Francisco, Chicago, San Diego, Raleigh, Austin, and Burlington, VT.

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