

The Geosocial Networking Craze

By Nikki Gloudeman

Twitter and Facebook? Those are so last status update. The newest craze in the online world is Foursquare, the social media service that allows users to virtually check in at hotels, restaurants and other locations, alerting other users of their whereabouts.

As the service has taken off, an increasing number of meeting planners have developed ways to integrate it into their events. Even more promising is a brand-new service called DoubleDutch, which offers the same basic functions of Foursquare, but is specifically geared toward conferences. Each service has its assets, and promises a new spin on meetings and events.

Want to know more? Here's some information to help you get in on the trend.

Foursquare

Foursquare is not the only geosocial networking site; similar platforms on the scene include Gowalla and Whrrl. But it's Foursquare, based in New York City, that's generated the most buzz. At press time, its user count stood at 2 million, with an estimated 15,000 users signing up for the service each day.

Jeff Korhan, a Naperville, Ill.-based new media marketer and speaker, who works with event planners, sees a range of possibilities for conferences. On the most basic level, he says, Foursquare provides a way for attendees to connect at a huge event. "I foresee something like, 'There's 2,000 people here, I know 500 of them, where are they?'" he says. By checking the network, attendees could easily identify who was at the hotel, expo, restaurant or airport, and meet up with them for a personal meeting. "If I see someone checked in five minutes ago at a restaurant across the street," he says, "I could head over and ask, 'Got room?'"

Another example: An attendee at the airport could find someone else there they wanted to connect with, meet up with that person and offer to share a cab. As Korhan says, this would be a "great way to bend the ear of someone in the industry who might otherwise not give you their time."

Foursquare can also be used to design creative engagement games. One of the reasons the site

has become such a huge hit is because it awards points and "badges" to people who go somewhere frequently enough. Those who show up the most become "mayors," a coveted position that has been known to inspire a competitive spirit in users. If you organized an event, you could easily integrate this by awarding badges to people who showed up regularly to a specific booth or attended a designated sequence of sessions. (Check out our blog, "Explore Ferris Bueller's City," for another creative approach to Foursquare.) foursquare.com

DoubleDutch

For all the potential uses of Foursquare at events, there has been one vital snag in its application to meeting planning: It hasn't yet reached critical mass, meaning a large number of people at an event probably won't be on it. Granted, users have the option to push their message out to their Twitter or Facebook followers, but for many, this poses a privacy problem. Location is a more personal piece of information than the standard tweet or status update, and Foursquare users are usually pickier about who they add to that network. Moreover, attendees who add others to their Foursquare network at an event ensure all those people will forever be tapped into their whereabouts.

Enter **DoubleDutch**. Unveiled in March, it includes a feature that makes it ideal for conferences—rather than channeling a vast network of friends, it allows planners to create a geosocial network solely comprised of event attendees.

This is an important distinction that can also assuage the fears of people hesitant about sharing their location, especially since there's been talk of Foursquare joining with Yahoo!, Google or Microsoft to make its data more public. "With DoubleDutch, information is totally private through the convention," says Pankaj Prasad, business development director for the San Francisco-based company.

Prasad says the service has already been used by several event organizers in unique and successful ways. At a recent online marketing summit, for example, the event's planner organized a

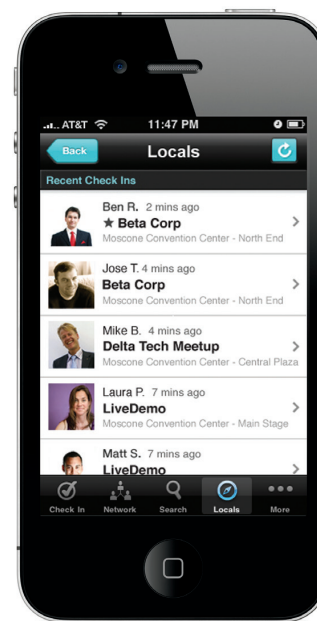


photo contest in which the first attendee to take a picture of a specific person at the event won a badge. The engagement impact, Prasad says, was huge. "People were literally running around trying to get this badge." For planners, this provides the opportunity to stretch some imaginative muscle. "We feel as though the conference organizer knows their convention the best, and can come up with really great games," Prasad says.

There's a financial incentive to the service, too. Prasad says the company typically doesn't pitch DoubleDutch as a nice service to have, but rather as a potential revenue stream. At a recent tech conference, for instance, a badge was sold to Microsoft, an exhibitor. Attendees who checked in to four specific sessions earned a Microsoft-branded badge, which led them to Microsoft's booth and the chance for a prize.

Whether or not Foursquare or DoubleDutch will become as popular with attendees as Twitter or Facebook is anyone's guess. But Prasad says it is, at the least, an intriguing new option. "This isn't going to revolutionize conferences forever," he says. "But it's a very exciting engagement tool that's never been available before." doubledutch.me