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Businesses welcome Foursquare phone game

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Krista Bennett first learned of this thing called Foursquare not quite a month ago, when Smokey Row coffeehouse started receiving a lot more electronic notices about where people were eating and drinking.

In a nutshell, it looked odd. But possibly important.

"It was showing up on our Twitter feeds a lot, and I figured I'd better try to understand this," Bennett said last week. "It almost seems like a treasure hunt."

Welcome, Des Moines, to Foursquare - an electronic and still-incomplete (in Iowa) land where people with smart phones leave menu tips for their friends and compete with each other to see who has the best social life. It's a land where everyone has a shot at claiming dominion over their favorite meeting places. And it could be one of the more promising corners of cyberspace for businesses hoping to make money off the latest Internet trends.

"I really haven't figured out the point of it yet, but it's definitely a form of social media that's ready to take off, I think," said Dale Stark, Foursquare player and public relations manager for the Civic Center of Greater Des Moines. "As a marketing aspect, I could see companies and businesses throwing out marketing and discounts and other kinds of insider information."

Foursquare, founded a year ago, until this month was only available in a few dozen cities. But developers opened the doors wide, for the first time allowing Iowans with iPhone, Android, BlackBerry or Palm Pre smart phones the chance to score points for eating lunch.

Foursquare - one of a group of geography-based phone apps, including Gowalla, Brightkite and MyTown - has announced the company now reaches a worldwide average of one "check-in" per second. Management did not return repeated requests to comment for this article.

The game itself works like this:

Players, after downloading the Foursquare application to their phones, check in at various locations around town. That unlocks "tips" that essentially serve as electronic Post-it notes from other players - a service that's intended to let participants, for example, sing the glories of a particular menu item or offer advice on the proper behavior in certain watering holes.

Players also collect "badges" based on where they go and what they do over time.

Foursquare players can form networks of friends, and the game features a leader board to keep track of who among a particular group of buddies has scored the most points.

Check in more than anyone else at a particular location, and Foursquare pronounces you "mayor" of that particular bar, restaurant, office park or auto body shop.

Link your Foursquare account to your Twitter page, and the game automatically will announce every place you visit and every time you take over as mayor of a new location.

Life might get a lot more confusing for Frank Cownie, who has the actual title of mayor of Des Moines.

Des Moines-area marketing professionals seemed to be among the most active Foursquare users in town.

They say it's the mayoral feature that seems to hold some of the most promise for businesses that want to reach out to their loyal customers.

"Location-based social networking is one of the up-and-coming segments of social media that's going to get a lot of play," said Drew McLellan of McLellan Marketing Group. "I don't think that anyone actually cares that I went to Starbucks or whatever, but I do think that for business it has some interesting applications."

For instance, there is the relatively low barrier to experimentation.

"There's no cost to me, other than my time, to advertise a buy-one-get-one-free bagel," McLellan said. "I don't have to pay for an ad, I don't have to do a direct-mail piece. I just type that into Foursquare, and my cost is zero. But I'm probably selling more coffee."

Stark sees potential in rewarding loyalty by avid customers. For instance, he posted a Foursquare tip two weeks ago advising Civic Center patrons to talk to their bartenders and pre-order drinks before an intermission.

It's all part of building a relationship with customers, said Larry James Jr., owner of Mars Cafe in Des Moines. Mars Cafe was one of the first Des Moines coffee shops to start advertising Foursquare specials for its "mayor."

"We've had a lot of success with using social media through Twitter and Facebook," James said. "Foursquare was a logical extension."

Participation in online conversations can give businesses a window into their customers' ever-changing tastes, habits and perceptions, he said. You end up better informed both about what they want and what they think about how your business is run.

"We're competing with multinational corporations," James said. "We're able to be much more agile and responsive to our customers by having conversations with them online. ... (The other guys) can't respond as quickly as we can."

Bennett agreed, adding that Smokey Row has seen nearly immediate results from special offers announced through Twitter.

With social media, "you don't have to think and wait about a promotion and do it two weeks later," she said. "You literally can do it and see results in an hour. ... It does seem like it is a more personal way to reach out to them because it is on their computer."

Of course, there aren't that many computers, or phones, playing yet.

Players last week estimated the number of Des Moines Foursquare participants as somewhere between several dozen and a couple hundred. On Thursday, the game listed 33 locations with an address that included "Des Moines." Only four had been visited more than 30 times and by more than 10 people.

"I think a lot of businesses in Des Moines don't understand it yet because it is so new," said Geoff Wood, a Des Moines business consultant who also serves as electronic mayor of, among other things, the Des Moines Public Library and the Windsor Heights Hy-Vee.

The group is serious and they're plugged into social media, he said.

"It's a small audience, but it is very dedicated," Wood said. "The people playing the game want to advance."

Additional Facts

How it works

- Download the Foursquare application to an iPhone, Android, BlackBerry or Palm Pre smart phone.
 - Go to various locations around town and "check in." Doing so unlocks "tips," which essentially are electronic Post-it notes from other players offering knowledge such as menu advice.
 - Collect "badges" based on where you go and what you do over time. Example: A badge for visiting bars on consecutive nights. Foursquare players can form networks of friends, and the game features a leader board to keep track of who among a particular group of buddies has scored the most points.
 - Check in more than anyone else at a particular location, and Foursquare pronounces you "mayor" of that particular place. Link your Foursquare account to your Twitter page, and the game automatically will announce your movements.
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