

COLUMNS

New ambient social apps enable brands to proactively connect with those nearby

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By [Jay Hawkinson](#)

A new wave of location-based applications has arrived on the scene to cheers of being the "next big thing" by the tech community while instilling fear in others.

Gary Schwartz, president/CEO of Impact Mobile, touched on this emerging trend in his [article about apps like Girls Around Me](#) that pull location and social graph information to help users connect with people in their vicinity.

Pete Cashmore, founder/CEO of Mashable.com, has declared these geo-social apps the "scariest tech trend of 2012."

Turning a corner

Despite the standard privacy concerns, this buzz could be indicative of the future of app development, taking location-based functionality to new heights.

These new ambient social networking apps enable people and businesses to connect with other people in their immediate vicinity in a more personal way than other apps have allowed.

This next level of geo-social app development was set in motion last year with the launch of Sonar followed by Ban.jo, Glancee and Kismet.

However, with Highlight recently under the spotlight at SXSW, it seems ambient social networking has finally turned a corner.

While these apps do not yet have huge user bases, the potential for marketers is there. Early adopters can run pilot programs to learn how to win now.

Simply put, these geo-social mobile apps help users and marketers learn more about the people around them.

Essentially these apps can analyze a user's social networks to see whether any of their friends are nearby or even notify a user to anyone within their vicinity that also has one of the ambient social apps installed and may share similar interests.

At that point the user can learn more about that person and "highlight" him or her if there is more than a passing interest. Cool or creepy? Possibly both.

Either way, this next level of location-based social networking offers marketers new, more proactive local marketing capabilities.

However, the question of mass adoption looms. Will these apps ever reach a critical mass to make it more than just a media darling and take it to the heights of a foursquare and beyond?

Ambient light

Ambient social networking appears to be a natural evolution of the geo-social mobile app and can succeed under the right conditions.

While that evolution is in the early phase, marketers have a huge opportunity to take these apps to the next level by finding creative ways to ingrain their businesses within them.

Brands can, for example, assume an identity on these apps by creating their own profiles and work to promote themselves by driving people nearby into their bricks-and-mortar stores.

This enables brands to proactively engage consumers in the vicinity without having to wait for a check-in to respond to, making the app work like a customer acquisition tool.

Marketers can identify consumers in the area and try to engage them by pushing out coupons, discounts or other deals to use instantly in-store.

In that way, these ambient social networking apps also create an opportunity for brands to act more as equals with users and move around to events and other locations, unlike Facebook where the business is simply a "place."

Marketers can also benefit by finding ways to build loyalty through these ambient social apps by offering rewards for check-in points to encourage frequent or repeat customers similar to what foursquare has implemented with their local business merchant platform.

Ambient social apps could improve this model with rewards or special offers available for a short time once the user enters the "geo-fence" around a business, encouraging a more immediate response.

Leveraging the inherent social, hyper-local aspect of the ambient apps, marketers can expand their footprint even wider by pushing out deals to users to share with friends or other customers found through the app, such as a buy-one-get-one-free discount.

Having users in the nearby vicinity, only a few feet from the store, will be a huge advantage of ambient advertising over standard social marketing.

If these apps can overcome the creep quotient to garner the much needed early adopters and eventually slide into the mainstream, they are in a position to make a big splash.

INVESTING THE TIME in these apps now may not provide the scale marketers want, but they offer a means to partake in what could be the most personal way to attract and engage new customers.

It could be a long road ahead for these geo-social apps to catch on, but it is worth a roll of the dice for brands that want to market to consumers in an ultra-personal, ultra-local manner.

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