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The new next big digital thing

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Understanding and keeping pace with an ever-changing digital landscape is no easy task for businesses and brand managers.

As soon as one new phenomenon arrives, another emerges. Facebook and Twitter may be the social darlings of today, but as today is a very long time in this current world of rapid change and unpredictability, whose turn is it next?

How do businesses keep up, how do they decide what is relevant, and - most importantly - how can they use these tools to create value and generate commercial outcomes?

The new wave that business should be getting excited about is the combination of social, mobile and location-based services. Two platforms that have emerged in this area - both of which are gaining plenty of media attention - are Google Buzz and Foursquare.

Foursquare is a mobile-based, location-aware social networking game where users collect badges and score points by "checking-in" to venues and places. They can then share comments and tips on products or services with others. The user who visits a certain place the most is also given the social cred of a "mayorship" and becomes the "mayor" of that place.

Buzz is a social networking and messaging tool from Google. Users can share links, photos, videos, status messages and comments that are organised in conversations. It enables users to choose to share publicly with the world or privately to a group of friends each time they post. Using Google Buzz via mobile adds in the location-based aspect - users can see what is being said around them.

These platforms are being used as part-utility and part-entertainment. The fact users are prepared to tell everyone and anyone what they are up to and where they are going creates an enormous opportunity for business and brands.

The business aspect of Foursquare is clear: businesses can tie offers and messages to their venues so that when Foursquare users are nearby or check-in to the venue, they see the offer or messaging.

When I checked into SY Squared, a restaurant in Melbourne's South Yarra, Foursquare let me know that nearby cafe Outpost was currently offering a free coffee to their most loyal Foursquare user. For businesses that have an on-the-street presence, it's worth setting up a free business account on Foursquare, which comes with analytics and intelligence about customer behaviour and patterns.

For any kind of business, it's worth having a presence on Foursquare and Google Buzz. Like Facebook, their targeted location-based services are new, but for now they are good broadcast streams, allowing you to promote your company and engage with current and potential customers.

It's not about one or the other - Twitter, Google Buzz or Foursquare - it's about working out what role these tools can play for your business.

At the moment, Foursquare has around 725,000 users, Twitter has 75 million users and Google Buzz has been released to more than 150 million Gmail accounts. Typically, faced with those sorts of numbers, a marketer would think, "Let's invest in the platform with the biggest numbers". But when it costs barely anything to be a part of this game, it pays to give different approaches a try and see what performs well and where you should be investing.

These platforms are not a fad and need to be taken seriously. Join the conversation and take this great opportunity to stay in touch with your "connected customer", wherever they are.

Karson Stimson is the founder of digital marketing company WeAreDigital

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