

Why mobile check-in apps may be the future of location-based marketing

By Jeff Hilimire, Chief Digital Office, Engauge

The promise of mobile marketing has been teasing the marketing and advertising world for years.

We have all known the potential was huge, but it has been difficult finding a way to bring that potential to realization. You either risk being intrusive to the consumer who is not used to having brands disrupt their mobile experience, or you take the online advertising approach of running banner ads within mobile applications and only further establish the “banner blindness” phenomenon.



About one year ago, a new type of application started gaining popularity.

These location-based “check-in” applications started sprouting up in droves. Words such as BrightKite, DodgeBall, Gowalla, Foursquare, MyTown, Whrrl and Loopt suddenly ended up becoming the “it” thing in social marketing, leaving most of us to wonder, “Do I really need another social network to join?”

But the beauty of these applications is that they work within your social networks, not in place of them.

These applications, mostly running on iPhones at the outset, are ushering a new way for marketers to find a relevant place to interact with consumers on their mobile devices.

Elvis is in the building

Let us take a step back. What exactly are these applications?

The process on most of these applications is to alert your friends when you are out and about. You go to a Starbucks coffee shop, you “check in.” You head to a Borders bookstore, you “check in.” You get to work, you check in.

Some of these applications have leaderboards, points systems, badges they give out, and even allow you to be the “mayor” of an establishment if you check in the most.

And while none of these applications has reached large usage numbers - all, for the most part, are fewer than 1million users - you can start to see the potential.

Retailers can offer specials to people who check in at establishments nearby. Restaurants can give free drinks to people who frequent more than four times a month, thus driving more visits. Bars can, and, in fact, some do, let the “mayor” drink for free on Thursdays.

In these examples, marketers can actually enhance the game experience by being involved. This is the nirvana of marketing - to actually be a positive, relevant part of the consumer’s world.

Big data

Additionally, there is a massive amount of consumer data that can be mined from these applications.

Just like on the Web, where you can track where people were before they came to your site and where they went after they left, you can do the same thing with these applications.

Want to know where a person was before they got to your bar? No problem, see where they checked in previously.

Companies can also leverage these applications to start building a loyalty program. Give people perks when they eat at your restaurant on a frequent basis. Give them a free round of drinks when they check in with five or more friends.

These applications can be used to enhance customer service, too. See that someone has checked in to your hardware store for the third time that day? Chances are they need some help.

You can start to see the potential of these applications to enhance mobile marketing efforts. And check-in applications are just the beginning of location-based marketing.

Once we have the ability to know where someone is at a given time, where they came from, who they are with and, in some cases, what they are doing, the ability to find relevant, meaningful ways to engage with them on their mobile device is limitless.

Jeff Hilimire is Atlanta-based chief digital officer of agency [Engauge](#). Reach him at jhilimire@engauge.com.