Foursquare:
Phenomenon or Fad?

If 2009 was the year of Twitter, 2010 looks set to be the year foursquare steals that crown. Described as a location based social networking service, it makes use of a number of the technological and cultural shifts of the last few years, including the rise of the mobile web, the added functionality that GPS and smartphone apps have brought, and our increasing happiness to share data about ourselves. To encourage interaction, users earn points by 'checking in' at various locations, with points resulting in badges: thus, you can become the 'Mayor' of your local cafe or cinema.

Foursquare has already been embraced by many of the same early-adopters who were the first to start using Twitter including uber-blogs such as Mashable & Techcrunch, and it has a user-base currently estimated at around 200,000[1]. Nevertheless, many marketers will be asking what all the fuss is about and whether they need to pay any attention.

The answer to the first question is difficult to predict. Foursquare isn't the only mobile location network, or even the first. But, then again, Twitter wasn't necessarily always the obvious choice to become the preeminent micro-blogging service. However, capturing the attention of people such as Techcrunch's Michael Arrington is a good way to generate PR, and is hardly likely to harm foursquare's chances. Whether it can continue to build on this hype remains to be seen, and leads us on to the second point: do marketers need to start taking notice?

The answer is a resounding maybe. Whilst foursquare itself may not end up being a world beater on the scale of Twitter, let alone Facebook or Google, the cultural & behavioural trends it showcases could have a long-lasting impact on how we interact with each other, and with brands.

For example, Twitter's long-term impact may end up being the fact that millions of people are now comfortable sharing their day to day lives with strangers, as well as the way that it has changed the way many people source and aggregate content: Foursquare's addition of geographical location to this mix could be its greatest legacy.

For whilst the game-like nature of foursquare may turn off many users who aren't interested in becoming the Mayor of anywhere, and the current lack of a Blackberry app excludes millions of business users worldwide (though this is due to be rectified imminently), it's likely that, with smartphone penetration scheduled to reach a tipping point in 2010[2], 'checking in', in some form or another, will become a common part of many people's digital lives, even if foursquare ends up being another Second Life, rather than this year's Twitter, though that doesn't seem too likely.

Because, with smartphone adoption known to drive mobile web use, and augmented reality allowing people to view digital data in a 'real-world' environment, the continued push by search engines to blend social commentary with the most personalised, *and localised* results means that people will soon be able to see who's saying what, and where they were when they said it.

At present this means that it's mainly businesses such as restaurants and cafes taking an interest in foursquare. But we can certainly see it spreading so that any business with a physical representation, whether it's a retailer or a bank, should consider how customers using foursquare could affect their reputation. And it needn't stop there: suddenly, localised blackouts on comms networks, or stock running out in a particular area, could all be events that very quickly reach a much wider audience, whilst special events could be promoted to a highly specific audience.

So if you want to know where your audience is, and what they're doing, why not let them tell you?

[1] http://www.techcrunch.com/2010/01/12/foursquare-check-ins/
[2] http://www.morganstanley.com/institutional/techresearch/pdfs/web2.0.pdf