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Geo-Social Networking 101

Daniel Burrus, Founder and CEO, Burrus Research

By now, most companies in the hospitality industry know how vital social networking tools are for their bottom line. From keeping a pulse on your customers' experience to branding your company to promoting your products and services, social networking allows you to do so much for so little.

In addition to the long-standing social networking leaders, such as Facebook and Twitter, there's a new category of social networking, called geo-social networking, that's making a big impact in the hospitality industry. In short, geo-social networking uses the GPS capabilities in most smartphones so that users can share their location and preferences with each other. It's creating location-based communities of shared interests, enabling people to link up with friends (or to find new friends) and share comments and photos based on what they're doing in a specific location -- and in real-time.

So while traditional social networking would produce posts like, "Just came back from dinner at LaCasa with Bill and Mary. Great food and drinks as usual," geo-social networking would produce posts like, "I'm at LaCasa with Bill and Mary at table 42. Who wants to join us?" Since more and more customers are using smartphones and geo-social networking apps, you want your hotel or restaurant to be a part of them.



Additionally, consider this: right now around the world, 1.1 billion people use the Internet, 1.4 billion people watch television, and 2.2 billion people use mobile phones. So if you look at the power of geo-social networking apps for smartphones, you will quickly see that it has the potential to be more powerful than television watching, simply because it's interactive and with you at all times.

The following is an overview of some of the more popular geo-social networking tools that hospitality operators can get involved with.

Foursquare currently has a quarter million people sharing where they are. These people are exchanging tips about what to do, what to eat, where to go for drinks, etc. Additionally, a system in foursquare allows users to "check-in" to various locations and gain points for their patronage. The more they visit a location, the more prizes they can get, including everything from free food and drinks to being named "mayor" of a location. So it combines elements of competition, fun, group/community, sharing, and high engagement. All of this activity is great for businesses that want to promote themselves. You simply get involved with Foursquare and give out certain awards/perks targeted to Foursquare users.

Google Buzz is taking Google's Gmail and creating a social network around it. Buzz adds a "news feed" to Google's free Gmail e-mail service, pulling in information that friends have posted, including videos from YouTube, photos from Picasa or Flickr, or updates from Twitter. Additionally, by using GPS, it helps you to know where the people you frequently communicate with are. This is useful for special events and venues, as people can easily recommend an activity, restaurant, or anything hospitality related to their network without having to send emails.

Loopt is one of the pioneers of geo-social networking, hitting the market for iPhone in 2006. It enables you to seek out the people in your address book and find out where they are at any given moment (with their permission, of course). So let's say there's a conference at your hotel or a banquet in your restaurant. Guests could use their Smartphones and easily find out where their colleagues or co-workers were in the hotel or restaurant. Or maybe a family with five kids is staying at your hotel. As long as the kids have their cell phones on, Mom could track where they are. And from a hotel standpoint, managers can track activity and movement patterns of guests.



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[Gowalla](#) is a geo-social networking app that's tied into a city guide. Like Foursquare, users can compete for prizes/rewards for going to different events and cities. The more events and cities you visit, the more prizes users get. If you have a hotel, restaurant, venue, or event in one of the featured cities, you want your establishment to be part of this app.

Ultimately, geo-social networking is about trying to serve the customer better and being creative in your interactions with them. The sooner you get involved with geo-social networking sites, the further you can stretch your marketing dollars and gain a new base of loyal patrons.

Daniel Burrus is a technology forecaster and business strategist. His is the author of six books, including the highly acclaimed Technotrends, which has been translated into over a dozen languages. He is the founder and CEO of [Burrus Research](#), a research and consulting firm that monitors global advancements in technology driven trends to help clients better understand how technological, social, and business forces are converging to create enormous, untapped opportunities.

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