

The 411 on Foursquare

Social networks are ten a penny these days. From giants such as Facebook and Twitter to niche services such as Yelp and the weird and wonderful Omegle, the internet is all a-babble.

Entrepreneurs are bombarded with opportunities: you've got your Facebook fan page up and running, your Twitter page is actively generating leads for your business, hell, you've even experimented with Google Buzz. Is it time to add Foursquare to your social armoury?

What is Foursquare?

First of all, a warning: Foursquare is hugely addictive. It is a geo-location service that allows you to 'check in' to various locations and update users in your network on your whereabouts. You can leave tips about places you visit - "Try the kangaroo steak, it's d'lish!" and you can leave yourself 'To do' notes: "Must check out the portrait of Theo Paphitis at the BP Portrait Awards". But - and this is the addictive bit - it's also a game. You earn 'badges' for various things: the 'Bender' badge for going out four nights in a row, for example. Or the tongue-in-cheek 'Player Please' badge, for checking in with three members of the opposite sex. If you check in at a single location enough times, you can even become a Mayor (until someone else trumps your check-in score).

The facts

Foursquare is still quite young. According to figures released earlier this week, the service, which launched in 2009, has about 2.6 million users. Small fry, compared to the 500 million on Facebook. But these users mostly conform to a very niche demographic: "Foursquare users are all technology-forward," says Neil Perkin, founder of digital and media consultancy Only Dead Fish. "If you're looking to connect with these kinds of people, especially those that work in media, advertising or the creative industries, this is the place to find them."

And while Foursquare is still a minnow in the social media pond, it is growing at an exponential rate. Earlier this year, the service added 100,000 users in 10 days. "Like all networks, Foursquare becomes more fun the more people you know on there," says Perkin. "These days, if I have a meeting in town, I can check in to find people I know in the area, friends or business contacts, and schedule a quick meet-up if anyone's nearby."

Why is Foursquare useful for business?

On the customer-facing side, Foursquare can be an incredibly useful tool. Any restaurant, bar or hotel chain could do much worse than create an account and check out comments made about their establishments.

You can encourage users to become regulars by offering promotions or Mayorships to your venue. And you don't even have to give away anything of any real value. Henry Dimbleby, CEO of £10m-turnover restaurant chain Leon, offers Mayors of his outlets a "free kiss" as soon as they announce themselves. Not all Mayors avail themselves of this prize...

Dimbleby decided to give Foursquare a whirl after seeing references to the service on Twitter. Although, conversely, "Everyone on Twitter seems to hate people who use it" he says. Dimbleby is a self-confessed 'newbie' on the site: he's on the hunt for the business benefits: "Can you tell me some?" he says.

Here's a good 'un. Foursquare gives businesses the opportunity to lure customers back again and again. Think loyalty cards, but digital and highly reactive: offer different rewards every tenth check-in for example, and refresh these monthly. Starbucks was one of the first corporations to jump on the Foursquare bandwagon, offering Mayors of their US shops a dollar off their coffee.

It's free to sign up your business to offer discounts and promotions for now. But this might change as Foursquare's popularity builds. There might also be the option to create bespoke badges for customers in the near future: imagine hundreds of users vying to achieve a badge featuring your company name.

Alec Fleming is the marketing manager at Meantime Brewing Company's The Old Brewery. The venue only opened its doors earlier this year, and has had an active presence on Twitter, Facebook and Foursquare since inception.

Fleming says: "As with all social media, Foursquare provides an excellent opportunity for businesses to understand their customers more. The world's largest referral programme in history is now under way. We realise this and so aim to communicate with our customers and offer them deals."

On May 6 this year, The Old Brewery awarded the prize of a free meal for two to its new 'Mayor', Leo Nicholson, who had risen to the top of the Foursquare leader board. This promotion was a huge draw

for students at the local college, and generated a lot of press for the business, including a feature in Bar magazine.

"This is an applicable tool to all industries and should be ignored at your own peril," says Fleming. "People are now checking in at all sorts of venues, and leaving feedback: train stations are high check-in venues, and consumers are leaving valuable information for not only other users, but also the operators of these sites."

Guy Levine is CEO of [Return on Digital](#), an SEO consultancy with offices in Manchester and London. His tip for small businesses: "If you are promoting a real-life location where you need footfall, run a locally-targeted campaign to bring more people into the store," he says.

"The big boys are using it well: Domino's offers a free pizza per week to Mayors of their stores, and Jimmy Choo is running a Foursquare treasure hunt to win a pair of Jimmy Choo trainers."

How do I measure results?

Foursquare has a handy business dashboard that allows firms to track check-ins on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. It can even distinguish between staff and customers to give a more accurate picture of footfall.

You can find out if your consumers are mainly male or female, reward frequent visitors or offer promotions to first-time buyers. And the dashboard is only going to get more sophisticated, as Foursquare introduces additional features including face recognition and video plug-ins.

Foursquare already integrates with Twitter and Facebook as standard, so your Foursquare fans can become social media advocates across these platforms at the click of a button.

This is great exposure for your brand even if some of your customer's followers, fans or friends may not be in the same town, or even the same country.

Also, it's worth noting that every citation for your business is a win. "The future of local search is changing," says Return of Digital's Levine. "Google are promoting more local listings and Foursquare produces a nice, clean location page including map reference."

Foursquare is unlikely to make you money in any direct sense. It's more of a means to gauge customer reactions to your business or services.

Foursquare has allowed Fleming to pit The Old Brewery's popularity against other venues in the area. "For both our retail outlets we have certainly established a community," he says. "They are two of the most highly checked-in venues in Greenwich."

Is there a future?

There is an elephant in the room here. Facebook. The social media leviathan is rolling out its own location service within the next few months. Given Facebook's scale and saturation, this could blow Foursquare out of the water.

Although Only Dead Fish's Perkins believes that Foursquare's industry knowledge gives it the edge: "They've been in the geo-location space for much longer and know their market."

Also, as Chris Mullan, Director and General Manager of Dell's Medium Business for UK & Ireland points out, Foursquare might be totally useless if your customers are technophobes: "If your target audience is not someone who would typically engage in the mobile internet or social media, Foursquare and other location-based technologies may not fit," he says.

"We would advise any business to understand how their customers work before trying new ways of talking to them." But, for most entrepreneurs, a little dabble can't hurt.

David Hathiramani, co-founder of £2.2m tailoring firm A Suit That Fits, says: "We believe new technologies give our customers the option to interact with us in many different ways, and that this can be extremely beneficial.

"We're currently exploring our audience through social media and Foursquare is definitely an area of interest within this strategy. As a business with studios nationwide, we hope the geo social and gaming elements of Foursquare will make it a really valuable asset."

So go sign up, check out your business, your competitors and your favourite hang-outs. You never know what gems the 'Tips' feature will throw up. In the meanwhile, I'm off to get my 'Crunked' badge.

Written by Rebecca Burn-Callander