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# Geosocial - Is location replacing connection?

## Will geosocial and location-based apps be a key digital trend in 2012

By Peter Blackman

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**It's 11.44am, January 18th (my birthday actually, as an aside), I'm in the office, and it's time to play with my banjo. Not alas, the musical instrument, but the 'social discovery' app [Banjo](#) that has been downloaded 500,000 times in its first six months since launch.**

Location based apps, or geosocial to give the technology its more sexy name is often touted as being one of the key digital trends for 2012. It's certainly been the source of some wonderful infographics from [Jess3](#) and [the next web](#). It's all too easy however, especially for those of us who work in design, to be seduced by these visual delights, and to start recommending clients allocate budget to geosocial this year. But, and it's a big but – should we be doing so? What are the facts as they currently stand? As reported in [Venturebeat](#) in December 2011, recent Forrester research urges caution for marketers:

*“Geosocial applications – also known as location-based social networks – hold potential for interactive marketers: They can help increase in-store visits, your brand's visibility, and consumer word of mouth by connecting people with their locations and with their friends. But despite this potential, most marketers haven't embraced the opportunity. And it's no wonder, because consumer adoption of location-based apps has been slow: Last year we found that only 4% of US online adults used geolocation apps monthly or more. And today although people are increasingly aware of geosocial apps and installing them on their devices, the number of people who actively use them is stagnant.”*

So is this a stagnant backwater rather than a fast flowing digital stream that brands should be plunging into? Back to plucking on my Banjo. It's simple and fun. A quick glance at my iphone shows me who is nearby. Let me qualify that – not everyone. Not all the people browsing the rails of [Uncle Sam's Vintage Clothing](#) beneath our office, or the students and young professionals tucking into a burrito at [Mission Burrito](#) just next door. No, Banjo is an aggregator of all location-based social updates. Open it up and you see the 16 people nearest you, as sourced from third party public geo-tagged social media updates, and what they're saying via a map or list view. It works whether or not you connect your own Facebook, Foursquare, Twitter or Gowalla accounts, though when you do connect your social accounts, the application highlights your friends and allows you to filter results for just your friends. Banjo is not unique of course, there were a host of geosocial launches in 2011 - Sonar, Yobongo, Mingle, Holler, not to mention the growth of foursquare and Facebook Places. Techcrunch wrote up an excellent summary of them all [here](#) under the slightly ominous headline 'The new social network: who's nearby, not who you know'.

So should we start to value location over connection? Banjo's slogan is 'Find out what you're missing' and its founder, Damien Patton, says *“Whatever it is that is going on around you - it could have an impact on*

*you in an important way.*" This is a similar argument to that put forward by Joel Simkhai, the founder of the location based app for gay men [Grindr](#), and more recently, and ambitiously, a similar one 'for everyone' called [Blendr](#). In an excellent article by Marshall Sella in [GQ](#), Simkhai asks:

*"Why do we drive ourselves crazy, getting in a car, doing all this travel? There are so many good things near us. Better things. We just don't know about them."*

Blendr, he claims *"will change the way people meet people... It can change the world."*

Though it hasn't changed my world, or even stopped me missing out, I can't deny that I've had fun with Banjo. Lacking a personal connection to the people it has a strong, though guilt inducing, voyeuristic appeal. Just this morning, before commencing writing this piece, I logged on and found one gentleman near me on Twitter, who provided a LOL moment via the juxtaposition of his profile pic, which was of his muscular torso clad in S&M gear, and his update, which was 'Shreddies for breakfast!'. Of course, this amusement aside I can see how if more people I knew were regularly using geosocial apps then they would be more useful. However as the Forrester research points out – we're not, so it isn't.

Here at G&V, we demand of all marketing activity, digital or otherwise, that it delivers the consumer at least one of three things. Value. Utility. Entertainment. As Mr Muscle and his Shreddies have, I hope, demonstrated, you can certainly find entertainment on geosocial. However, as ex CEO of Myspace, Michael Jones told [CNN Money](#):

*"where Myspace came up short was on utility - that is, we didn't have a product that compelled users to come to the site every day, something that had true-long lasting utility for consumers."*

Sadly for entertainment – fun though it is – utility and value are what will keep consumers coming back day after day, creating a community that is worthwhile for brands to consider investing in or becoming a part of. So how does geosocial perform at present against these two crucial criteria?

In terms of value, branded geosocial initiatives such as [O2 moments](#) deliver offers that can be matched to my location and lifestyle, but as it sits outside my main regular digital interactions, I have to remember to check it – and more often than not, I forget. In terms of utility, we are back to the 'critical mass' argument again, meaning that at present there are simply not enough people using specific geosocial apps for them to make my life easier or better. While on this subject it's worth returning to the Venturebeat article, and their paraphrasing of the Forrester research, that *"Marketers... should specially target geosocial app users because they skew younger, are early adopters, and are twice as likely as the average adult to "share information about products they are considering purchasing or have purchased, or a product review."*

While this is true, online research which we have conducted for one of our own clients, [Brothers Cider](#), has found that these younger, early adopting consumers already use Facebook and Twitter in such a

conversational, public, geosocial way that brands would be better served continuing to focus their efforts on interaction on these more established networks than on investing in new ones. As Forrester concludes:

*“All online adults are increasingly using location-based features on mobile devices, accessing the mobile Internet from many locations, looking for deals in exchange for brand interaction, and interested in what their friends are doing and what they think. We predict that location will no longer be a specialized service but, rather, embedded into all mobile activities, making location-based marketing a key tactic for marketing in the future.”*

Finally, and fundamental to the potential of geosocial is online disinhibition and personal privacy and safety. As [The Economist](#) asked in an article entitled ‘The secret sexism of social media’:

*“According to Pew, a research outfit, geosocial services like Foursquare and Gowalla attract twice as many men as women. What makes this finding striking is that, in general, women use social media more heavily than men do. (The pop-psychology explanation: women are more social than men.) So why do women lag men in geosocial media?”*

The two hypotheses offered by the writer are that women are more concerned about their own security (agreed), and that men are more attracted to the ‘competitive’ nature of checking in and becoming, however futile it might be, ‘mayor’ of somewhere or other. I’m not wholly convinced by the second argument. I think that competitiveness is part of it, but rather that characteristic is just part of a larger social digital phenomenon, that of online [disinhibition](#). As John Suler summarises in ‘The Psychology of Cyberspace’.

*“It’s well known that people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn’t ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel more uninhibited, express themselves more openly. Researchers call this the “disinhibition effect.” It’s a double-edged sword. Sometimes people share very personal things about themselves. They reveal secret emotions, fears, wishes. Or they show unusual acts of kindness and generosity. We may call this benign disinhibition.*

*On the other hand, the disinhibition effect may not be so benign. Out spills rude language and harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats. Or people explore the dark underworld of the internet, places of pornography and violence, places they would never visit in the real world. We might call this toxic disinhibition.”*

More men are active on geosocial because they’re not concerned about security, quite the reverse, they want to broadcast to the world where they are, what they are doing. They are more disinhibited geosocially. For them it is a moment of digital preening akin to the male peacock displaying his dazzling tail plumage. What women do not know of course, is whether this new peacock, who is a stranger to them is benign, and therefore safe to approach, or toxic, and to be avoided at all costs. So best to not ‘check in’ or reveal your whereabouts.

In the non digital 'real' world, nightclubs know that to be successful they have to attract women. When they're not talking about sports, men follow women. So nightclubs have 'Ladies' nights where women get in free and jump the queue, while men salivate in the cold (talking about sport) and wait to pay their entrance fee. In such scenarios, women come with friends who look after each other, keep each other safe, or at the very least, help to make good decisions about that bloke over there with the nice smile. On geosocial, no such support group exists, and what's more, the disinhibited man may have posted up a fake photo, or provided false information about whether or not he is married, mixed up, or a murderer. Until geosocial apps can close the gender gap revealed by the Pew research, brands are probably better off trialing geosocial activity on established social media platforms, and when doing so, ensuring that the campaigns keep in mind the individual's right to privacy and security.

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