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Finding friends

NETWORKING TOOL CONNECTS BUSINESSES AND CUSTOMERS



Luke Vaillancourt shows the Foursquare app on his iPhone. (T&G Staff/PAUL KAPTEYN)

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WORCESTER — Crystal Anson's phone beeped and chirped and buzzed as it sat on the bar at the Armsby Abbey on Main Street on a recent afternoon.

She picked it up a few times, but didn't answer it.

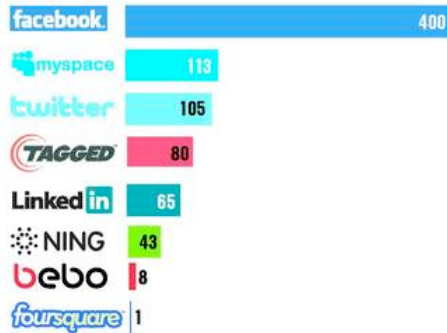
"This device I'm holding in my hands that makes phone calls," she said, holding the BlackBerry with one hand as she ran her other hand along the front, as if performing a product demonstration. "I don't use it for phone calls."

Ms. Anson is on Facebook, of course, and she's also an avid Twitter user. But she's one of a few people in the area who have taken up Foursquare, the latest craze in social networking.

According to its website, Foursquare (www.foursquare.com) is a cross between a friend-finder, a city guide and a game that rewards you for

Social network members

Number of worldwide users in millions



Sources: Individual company websites
T&G Staff/DON LANDGREN JR.

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doing interesting things. Sounds simple, but it's attracted the attention of Facebook, which is reportedly rumored to be working on a similar check-in "geo-locator" system.

Sort of a cross between Twitter and Google Maps, Foursquare is a social networking tool that combines GPS locating with micro-blogging, and even includes a treasure hunt-style game that gives users badges and other rewards.

For example, perhaps unbeknownst to the proprietors, Ms. Anson is the "mayor" of the Abbey, along with several other places, including Jumpin' Juice & Java on Chandler Street.

The way it works is simple: Users sign up for an account that can be used via texting, but it seems to work best with phones such as BlackBerries or iPhones that have Internet access. Foursquare uses the phone's GPS technology to bring up a list of nearby places in its database. Users then can "check in" when they arrive at a destination. Ms. Anson, for example, checked in at the Abbey, using the Foursquare application on her phone.

"I have a 4:30 interview with reporter from Telegram about Foursquare (@ Armsby Abbey)," the blurb stated.

The check-in basically serves two purposes: It lets users' Foursquare friends know where they are if they want to, say, join them for a drink. And if business owners, who are also invited to participate with Foursquare, choose to use it, they can offer specials and get a unique picture of who is coming and going.

There's also a tips function that allows users to make recommendations.

"You can say, 'Hey, there's really good stuff here,' " Ms. Anson said. "Or, I'm at (Citizen Wine Bar on Commercial Street), go there and try this, or I'm at the Abbey, try this and that."

Ms. Anson admitted she felt Foursquare was encouraging consumerism.

"You're going out to dinner, you're shopping," she said.

Luke Vaillancourt, who manages the digital marketing and e-commerce branch of the family business, Vaillancourt Folk Art in Sutton, was described by Ms. Anson as a "fellow Foursquare junkie."

Mr. Vaillancourt called himself a casual user of social media and said he likes to use Foursquare mostly to keep in touch in real time with college and professional friends and select media news sources.

He also runs www.worcesterscene.com, a website that promotes local bars and restaurants. He said local businesses should embrace websites like Foursquare, which allow them direct, real-time access to how their customers operate. He set up a Foursquare site for Vaillancourt Folk Art, and offers discounts on certain items for every third check-in.

Foursquare hasn't taken off with the typical Vaillancourt Folk Art demographic, but Mr. Vaillancourt said that as the business tries to grow among younger consumers, it could catch on. He said he looks at Foursquare as something that complements the marketing and advertising already used by the family business. For small businesses without big marketing and advertising budgets, sites like Foursquare help get the word out, he said.

"We do Foursquare, we do Facebook," Mr. Vaillancourt said. "You have to, just in case someone ever does use it. Just to see if there's viability there."

When asked whether it's a little creepy to broadcast where you are at all times, Ms. Anson said she's not so concerned about that, although she mentioned the Foursquare community was abuzz recently after a site started up that aggregated Foursquare locations with the intention of letting burglars know when people weren't home.

Ms. Anson said that more than anything, she feels that websites such as Facebook, Twitter and Foursquare have left her a bit lazy in the friendship maintenance department.

"Foursquare is my lazy way of getting people to come hang out," Ms. Anson said.

Social networking has had the strange effect of getting people closer together and farther apart at the same time. Ms. Anson said her mother and grandmother are even starting to text.

"My mom doesn't call me anymore, she just texts me 20 times a day," Ms. Anson said.

Being hyperconnected means never having to be out of touch. Ms. Anson said that wipes out a lot of the small

“ Foursquare is my lazy way of getting people to come hang out. ”

-- CRYSTAL ANSON, FOURSQUARE FAN



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talk that typically happens when friends get together.

"When you haven't seen people in a while, you don't have to catch up," Ms. Anson said. "You already know what your friends are doing."

Foursquare CEO and co-founder Dennis Crowley, who is originally from Medway, said in an e-mailed response to questions that Foursquare is "pretty careful about who sees what." He said only friends can see other friends' locations.

"And we only know where you are when you tell us where you are. We take privacy really seriously."

Mr. Crowley said Foursquare has taken off quickly in other areas.

"Well, we started with big cities first (New York City plus 10 others) and then went to 20, 30, 50, 100... and then it just kind of took off everywhere."

Mr. Vaillancourt said users should absolutely be concerned about their privacy. He predicted that privacy concerns that started with MySpace, and more recently with Facebook, could reappear as Foursquare gains popularity and piques the interest of advertisers.

Still, he said, he's amazed at how savvy some businesses have become. For example, he had a customer service issue recently with a national company.

He said he blogged about his issues on Twitter and a customer service representative from the company quickly contacted him via Twitter to try to resolve the issue.

"You're getting direct responses from individuals," Mr. Vaillancourt said.

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