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# 'Location Wars': What Does Geocentric Tech Mean for You?

**Find Friends, Track Family and More With Location-Based Services**

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Want to know what's top of the mind for geeks around the country right now?

Your location.

The hottest topic at the [South by Southwest Interactive conference](#) in Austin, an annual fest for all things social media that wrapped up Tuesday, was location-based services, or more to the point, apps that will let you do anything from finding a friend on a Friday night to navigating the globe using 3-D map technology.

Startups from all over the world pitched mobile applications that use GPS and other location data from cell phones to help consumers socialize, shop, game, date and engage in countless other activities.

With whimsical names like [Loopt](#), [Foursquare](#), [Whrrl](#) and [Gowalla](#), they came out in full force, trying to win what some are calling the "location wars." Better known companies are in on it too. [Twitter](#) recently added a location feature and [Facebook](#) is expected to add one soon.

"Your mobile devices are getting smarter, so even a base phone you get for free when you sign up with your mobile carrier will have GPS capabilities. The phone has the ability to at least some degree tell you where the phone's at, which makes it easy to tell the apps on the phone where you're at and what you're doing," said Josh Babetski, an evangelist and product manager for [MapQuest](#).

That extra layer of "slice of life" data, he said, could help unlock the potential of social networks, mobile technology and more.

Here are a few ways the future of location-based technology could affect you:

## **Finding Your Friends and Keeping Track of Family**

Some of the most popular location-aware applications revolve around broadcasting your location in real-time to friends and family.

When you walk into a place -- say a hot party or new restaurant -- you pull up your app of choice and "check in" to send an alert to others in your network, letting them know that you've arrived. Some services like Foursquare and Gowalla (two of the major players in the geo-social space) have turned the activity into a game, so you earn points or other kinds of rewards the more you check in.

You can also scroll through your list of friends on the network to see if they're close by and what they're saying.

Locating friends and family while you're out and about could not only be valuable in itself, but location-based networks could also clue you in to what's happening at places you've considered checking out.

Babetski said that seeing what others are saying about a place they're visiting could be very helpful.

"What's more interesting -- going to a pizza place and seeing 3.5 stars out of 18 reviews, or reading social comments of people who are there eating, or just recently ate there and said, 'Oh my God, I found a hair in my pizza?'" he asked.

While checking in is still a relatively new concept (FourSquare has reportedly about 500,000 users, Gowalla has about 100,000), Babetski said it could become ubiquitous by the end of the year.

Steve Lee, a Google product manager responsible for many of the company's mobile and location-based products, said the technology could also help families keep track of loved ones. As he travels around the world for work, he said his family can follow him on Google Latitude to virtually see what he's up to.

"[My mom] can check my location on Google Maps to see when I've arrived and that I've gotten there safely," he said. "It's also a great conversation starter."

## **Location-Triggered Ads Sent to Your Phone**

Imagine walking by your favorite store and instantaneously receiving a message on your cell phone letting you know that the store is having a 25 percent off sale, for one day only.

That scenario isn't too far away.

In February, [Placecast](#), a San Francisco mobile advertising company, launched a location-based advertising program called ShopAlerts, which gives customers geo-triggered messages.

Placecast draws a virtual "geo-fence" around a certain location, and when a customer steps into the fenced area, he or she receives a location-specific ad.

"Geo-fence technology represents the next frontier for digital marketing as consumers expect to connect with brands at the right place and time, all via their mobile device," Alistair Goodman, CEO for 1020 Placecast, said in a statement when ShopAlerts launched.

Of course, not all consumers may want to sacrifice that personal piece of real estate they might lose

with location-targeted ads. But Placecast's program only applies to customers who opt-in to the program, with brands and promotions that they choose.

## **Personalized Information Delivered on the Spot**

Maybe you don't want an ad sent straight to your phone, but how about instant mobile messages about places you could find your favorite music or favorite foods?

That's what Loopt, one of the first geo-social networks, provides its users. Once users check in, they can access a stream of information about where they are, from local points of interest to location-specific tips from other users.

Sam Altman, the company's co-founder and CEO, said this week at a panel that a person's location history is a powerful identifier.

"It's an amazing and rich data set for targeting people," he said. "You really are so a product of the places you've been, even more perhaps than the Web sites [you've visited]."

With the location history as a guide, he said a service could learn a person's tastes and patterns and then recommend tailored information.

In [a recent piece](#) for the Wall Street Journal, Altman said that future services could learn the time and route of a person's commute to work and send alerts when there are traffic delays on that route. Another service could recommend restaurants enjoyed by people who have also liked the same restaurants.

Privacy is certainly an issue, but Loopt has said that it gives users control over what information is shared and how it is used.

## **Sharing Your Experiences**

Google's Lee said that an especially interesting application of location-based technology is the ability to document or share a rich, multimedia account of a significant experience.

With [Google Latitude](#)'s location history feature, users can keep a record of their past locations and then review them on Google Maps or Earth.

He said the feature could be valuable to people wanting to recall a special vacation or trip.

In a few minutes, he said, a user could review the locations stored by Google Latitude, make edits if necessary, and then marry that history with photos taken along the way.

"Because photos have a time associated with them, you can then correlate that to your location history and it automatically geo-codes," he said. "In a very short amount of time, they can pull together a nice package detailing their trip to share with family and friends."

## **Immersing Yourself in Maps**

And what would location be without maps?

Danny Moon, co-founder of [UpNext](#), a free smart phone application that gives people a 3-D way to navigate cities, said that as people continue to use location-based services, they're going to want different ways to visualize all the new kinds of data that's available.

"Maps are no longer simply a way to get from point A to point B," he said. "It's more about showing you what your environment is."

So instead of giving users a static grid map, UpNext offers a 3-D interactive map that virtually drops users onto city streets. Users can tap on specific buildings to see which venues they house or rotate the map to give a different view. UpNext is in four U.S. cities, but is working on expanding to other areas.

While common grid maps are helpful in their simplicity, he said that as people continue to explore new places with their phones as the point of entry, it's helpful for them to visualize their surroundings, including the places beyond their field of vision.

[Navigon](#), a German navigation software company, also offers an iPhone app (for prices starting at \$89.99) with 3-D panorama and terrain views that rely on NASA data.

"You're really seeing people being able to almost step into something and really see what's around them," Moon said.

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