# Foursquare: A Health Education Specialist Checks-In— A Commentary

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More and more, health education specialists are integrating technology into their work. Whereas most are familiar with social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, one relatively new form of social media, location based services (LBS), may be less familiar. Developed in 2000, LBS are software applications that are accessible from a mobile device. LBS use global positioning system (GPS) technology to identify a user's exact location.[1] Once located, users can query useful information such as the closest fitness facility or their favorite coffee shop. Although LBS have been available for over 10 years, the release of Apple's iPhone and Google's Android operating systems opened the door to LBS for millions of consumers.[2] Major players in LBS include Gowalla, Facebook Places, and Loopt; however, foursquare dominates. In fact, in 2010, foursquare experienced a 3400% user increase by signing up their six millionth user and logged more than 381 million "check-ins," including one from the International Space Station.[3]

Foursquare, like other Web 2.0 technologies, is a social interaction platform and a powerful marketing tool for businesses. In addition to being free, businesses that claim their venues on foursquare have access to real time statistics of their patrons' gender, number of check-ins, time of check-ins and the portion of check-ins shared on Twitter and Facebook.[4] Businesses can also offer specials and badges when patrons check-in, enticing new customers to visit and offering virtual

incentives to those who return. Although originally designed for businesses such as libraries, museums, restaurants and shoe stores,[5] health education professionals have taken notice of these features and are also tapping into foursquare's potential.

Foursquare's health-related debut occurred in 2009 when Music Television (MTV), in partnership with Kaiser Family Foundation, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and others, sponsored the MTV's "Get Yourself Tested" (GYT) campaign. Foursquare users who got tested for STIs, checked in at a facility and commented "GYT," received the MTV "GYT" badge and *virtually* reduced stigma around STI testing.[6,7] Foursquare also partnered with CNN's "Eatocracy" program encouraging visits to one of the 10,000 USDA recognized farmers' markets around the U.S. and earning users the CNN "Healthy Eater" badge.[8] More recently, Runkeeper, an online management system for fitness activities, connected with foursquare, enabling users to link their Runkeeper accounts with foursquare to earn the "5K" and "Marathon" badges.[9] Additionally, foursquare supports a "World AIDS Day" badge,[10] the "American Red Cross Giving Blood" badge,[11] the "Gym Rat" badge,[12] and the "Downward Facing Dog" yoga badge,[13] all of which raise awareness and encourage positive health behaviors.

Despite the plethora of health-related foursquare references, none are from

peer-reviewed articles. The paucity of peer-reviewed articles is unfortunate given 25 million people were using smartphones in December 2009, with an anticipated increase to 100 million by 2013.[14] In addition, more than three-fourths of Internet experts believe that "the mobile phone [will] be 'the primary connection tool' for most people in the world by 2020."[14(pp. 187-188)] Correspondingly, the 2008 fourth-quarter report from Nielsen Mobile cites that location-based services account for 58% of the total downloaded application revenue for mobile phones in North America.[2] Further, the proposed *Healthy People 2020* Health Information and Technology Objectives 5.1 and 6.3, aim to increase the proportion of persons who use the Internet to keep track of personal health information and increase the proportion of persons who use mobile devices, respectively.[15] These trends urge health education specialists to capitalize on the potential of mobile and web-based technologies. One way to do this is to learn more about foursquare, how it works and how it is best used in health education practice.

To join foursquare go to www.foursquare.com and click "join now." Once there, create a username and password, customize your profile by uploading photos and adding

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personal details, adjust the privacy settings to suit your needs, and add or invite friends from Facebook, Twitter, or other social networks. Alternatively, you can download the application to a smartphone, such as an iPhone or Android, or other mobile device, such as an Apple iPod Touch, and select "sign up." After registering, users can participate via computer or mobile device. Even persons without a smartphone can partake by texting from their phone.[5]

Foursquare has three main features: check-ins, badges and tips.[5] A "check-in" tells foursquare where the user is located. Locations, also known as venues, can be specific sites such as a softball field or a specific event, such as a community health fair. If a venue does not show up or cannot be found during a search, it can be added by typing it in. Users can choose to broadcast their location to their foursquare, Twitter, or Facebook networks or choose to remain "off the grid," which prevents check-ins from showing up to anyone.[16] Upon check-in, users can earn points, badges, superuser status and mayorships.[17]

When users access a location, they collect "badges" such as the "Newbie" for checking in for the first time at a location or the "Explorer" badge after checking in at 25 unique venues.[5] Those with the most daily check-ins at a specific venue over a 60-day period become the "mayor" of that venue—but only until someone else tops the record.[17] To encourage competition further, foursquare broadcasts these honors to other users and maintains a Leaderboard that ranks users by the number of points obtained in the current city and current day.[17]

"Tips," the third feature of foursquare, include short messages about a particular venue, such as a recommendation for a new restaurant or the time and place of an event. Nearby foursquare users can view and share these tips, visit the venue, or even participate in the event's activities.

As mentioned earlier, foursquare is a powerful marketing tool, but for health education it can be so much more. Consider the sensitive topic of organ donation. To raise awareness and influence attitudes

one could create organ donation sign-up venues at the local department of motor vehicles, offer an "*Organ Donor*" badge and encourage customers to share the tip "I'd give my heart, would you? Sign-up to be an organ donor today." Foursquare check-ins could also cue people to engage in short-term health actions such as getting a flu shot. Health departments can serve as "free flu shot" venues and encourage users to check-in, earn the "*Knock Out the Flu*" badge and shout "Free flu shots at the ABC health department." Staff could leave a tip announcing the hours of the clinic and information about flu prevention.

Foursquare can be used in the creation of helping relationships and in providing with social support activities. Foursquare's concept of friends, the people who you allow to know where *you* are, and followers, the people who allow you to know where *they* are is very similar to that of Facebook and Twitter.[18] Health education specialists can create a group of "friends" from participants in a weekly healthy eating program. By doing so, a small network emerges where members provide encouragement, share tips about local grocery stores and meet up at the local farmer's market to shop together.

Foursquare may also help people adhere to a long-term behavior change such as tobacco cessation. Replacing tempting locations with smoke-free alternatives is considered an effective change strategy. Health education specialists could identify and create smoke-free venues for clients at clubs and events such as outdoor concerts, encourage them to check-in and earn the "*Smoke-free Socialite*" badge, or receive free nicotine replacement products for those trying to quit.

Like any other health education strategy or tool, foursquare should be used wisely and as part of a larger, theoretically sound program. Additionally, it is important to assess the needs and wants of your community to make sure that a strategy using smartphone technology is appropriate. So how can we as health education specialists get started with integrating social media into health communication programs and

campaigns? A great place to start is the CDC's Social Media Toolkit, designed to help professionals strategize about their audience and potential social media tools and channels.[19] The toolkit includes social media data resources, lessons learned, descriptions of social media tools and a Social Media Communication Strategy Worksheet. The worksheet lists starter objectives that can be customized to determine what your target audience will do as a result of experiencing the communication. These objectives can easily guide the development of foursquare strategies, too. For example, if you want to "encourage a health behavior" a possible foursquare strategy could be to organize a community-wide healthy eating scavenger hunt tied to check-ins at local healthy food venues. Working with local vendors to offer an incentive to community members who check-in for an annual screening or test and show their "*Healthy Living*" badge is a way to "collaborate with partners." The possibilities are endless and are only limited by one's creativity.

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