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Social Networking Evolves

Posted In: Near Field Communication

By Andrew Berg

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The integration of location-based services is the next step for the increasingly sophisticated world of mobile social networking.



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Easy-to-use smartphone interfaces, like BlackBerry and iPhone, have given mobile social networking a big boost. A recent Nielsen survey showed social networking was the fastest growing sector of mobile Internet use from November 2007 to November 2008.

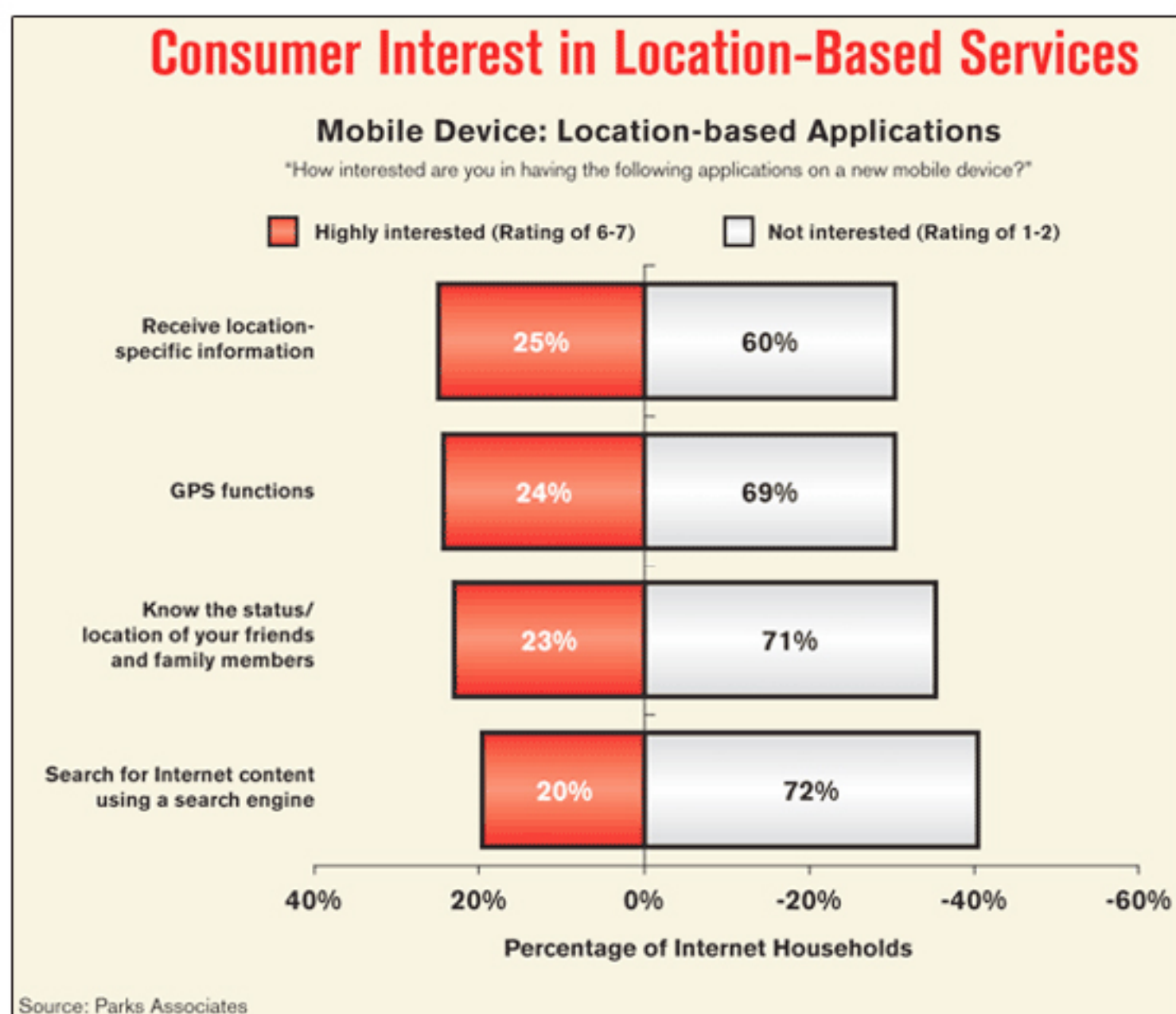
"Over 300 million SMSs were sent just from social networking sites in Q3 of 2008," said Jerry Rocha, senior director of Mobile Media and Advertising at Nielsen Mobile. Mobile convergence applications are popping up faster than users can Twitter, chirp and chat about them, which appears to be broadening the playing field for social networks big and small. People are connecting with one another on their mobile phones, and they're doing it in increasingly sophisticated ways.

While users are often amazed by the exponential, six-degrees growth of their Facebook and MySpace networks, they're about to experience some seriously Orwellian technology. The integration of location-based services (LBS) with social networking platforms is ushering in a brave new world. Humans have evolved from smoke signals to the Internet, and location-based mobile social networking is the next step in that evolution. As carriers become increasingly reliant upon data for revenue, data-intensive hybrid technologies like LBS-integrated social networking may be the future cash cows of the mobile industry.

In Theory

Where's my family? Where are my friends? Where's my dog? Where am I? With the advent of location-based social networking, these may be questions of the past. Real-time location of people, places and things is the next layer of social networking. The promise: Allow users integration of all their social networking services, while offering real-time location-based information from friends and family. That promise includes the sharing of user-generated content – pictures, video, documents, points-of-interest, travel routes – from anywhere, anytime. Admittedly, that's a big order to fill and a few glitches may pop up along the way, but on the whole, the technology appears to be on the brink of doing it all.

Nanomatic is just one of many companies that offer an application for adding real-time LBS to social networks. Nanonavi allows users to take all of their social networking contacts and mash them into one interface. But Nanomatic has taken things a step further with the nanoFinder, a small device that can attach to a dog's collar or slip into a child's pocket. "The device is assignable. If you want, you can take it off your dog and put it in your luggage when you check in at the airport," said Wilson Chan, director and co-founder of nanomatic. The nanoFinder requires a monthly subscription purchase and integrates with nanonavi. The device shows up as another locatable friend on the software.



PRIVACY RULES

"There's lingering privacy concerns, but theoretically, if you don't want to be found, you don't have to be found," said Nigel Wright, vice president of product marketing at Spirent. Wright noted that privacy worries, baseless or not, have been the main cause for slow rollout of LBS products in Europe. Nanonavi does allow users to remove their presence from the network whenever they wish. But Sarah Kornfeld, co-founder of nanomatic, dismissed the suggestion that users have Big Brother on their minds when they think of LBS technologies. In fact, Kornfeld feels that users are craving the kind of connections that nanomatic offers. "You'd be amazed by the responses we've had to the nanoFinder. People get tears in their eyes. It kind of takes you out of that privacy bubble for a moment," she said.

So is the technology really at a place where a user can locate the café where her friends are sipping espresso and pontificating on the issues of the day? Wright is skeptical. "GPS definitely has some issues," he said.

"The technology was originally developed by and for the military to be used in wide-open spaces for the tracking of missile systems, aircraft and troops. It was never meant to be used indoors amid an urban environment with lots of buildings and obstructions."

Because of the limitations of GPS in an urban environment, most wireless devices rely on assisted GPS (A-GPS). A-GPS employs a hierarchy of backup technologies to determine a user's location. If a GPS satellite cannot be found or is obscured, the technology falls back on cell sites to locate a user. Local-range technologies, such as Wi-Fi and Bluetooth, also can be employed. "If the user is on their phone in the basement and can't locate a GPS satellite, the device falls back on technologies like Wi-Fi, which can triangulate your location by the use of base-station addresses, but those are admittedly less accurate," Wright noted.

Better accuracy may get some help from Russia. "Russia's Global Orbiting Navigation Satellite System (GLONASS) may pick up the slack when U.S. satellites are obscured or out of reach," Wright said. "But realistically," he added, "I think it's fair to say you can get a pretty good idea of the general area where your friends are at, but consistently accurate coordinates that tell you whether your buddy is at home or at the neighbor's may be a few years off."

Close Enough?

Regardless of the flaws that need mending, location-based mobile social networking is looking like one of the cornerstone innovations of the wireless industry's future. A second-quarter 2008 Parks Associates survey showed that 24% of users in Internet households are highly interested in receiving location-specific information on their mobiles. Twenty-three percent said they were highly interested in knowing the status/location of friends and family members.

Those numbers represent big revenue if capitalized upon. "GPS technology is ready to shine...device makers, application developers and operators are looking beyond basic GPS routing function to innovative, location-based content and services," concluded Harry Wang, senior analyst for Park Associates. "At the end of the day, however, it's all about providing the user with simple access to their friends on a friendly interface, and business model development will be the key challenge for vendors."



Wang: GPS technology is ready to shine.

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