

Whasssup With That?

by Steve Smith

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CAN'T SAY THAT I personally understand the appeal of the Sprint Friends Lounge. When I pop into this mobile chat and community service, it just looks like a bunch of random posts organized into a few themes, demographic groups, and regions. Dozens of fellow cruisers are in any of these rooms at any time, and cruising is precisely what it seems they are doing. A long scroll of posts are mostly one and two word come-ons: "Whassup?" "I'm here in Dover" etc. And I am an old fart from Jersey. My idea of socializing is white-wine-and-chat about that latest PBS documentary. Yeah, I'm an old fart, but even so, this does not look a thing like "community" to me. According to the major provider of this and many other mobile lounges, AirG, I probably shouldn't understand what is going on here. Over 80 percent of the 10 million AirG members across many carriers and "lounges" are between the ages of 18 and 30, and almost 60 percent don't even own a PC. "People who use social networking on cell phones are not in front of their PC all day," says Frederick Ghahramani, co-founder of AirG. "They are the people who power America, who work in hair salons and work in Starbucks." They are the folks who take five-minute breaks and pop open their cell phones to seek out a friend in one of these lounges.

The encounters are not always random. You can collect friends in buddy lists and check their presence when you log in. Ghahramani insists that mobile community requires three elements: identity, presence, and interactivity. Others need to be able to find out who you are and what you are about, know you are there, and make exchanges with you across different formats. Mobile blogs are not really enough, because there is little live community involved. The average AirG user is spending nearly an hour a day on a service that lets him or her post text messages or flip into IM and chat sessions.

Ghahramani is hoping that his army of 10 million not only power America but also power an emerging mobile marketing engine. He is pitching the AirG network as a media platform with over 2 billion WAP page impressions a month that can be targeted according to the profiles all of these millions of users provide. AirG has their age, sex, and general location, often their income levels and a host of general interests. The beauty of social networking is that users volunteer detailed profile information in order to make better connections with other like-minded folks. Ghahramani says he can locate Latino males in the New York City area of a certain income level, if a marketer wants them. The profiles are so precise, he says, that you can do a keyword targeted promotion and focus an offer on members with very specific terms of interest in their profiles.

AirG is already running about fifteen campaigns this quarter, including Schick and Verizon DSL and says they garner CTRs in the 5 percent range. With the right target and offer, however, you can get tremendous response in a social network, Ghahramani claims. By offering a free game trial to a gaming segment on mobile, one campaign approached an 80 percent clickthrough.

I have to imagine that advertising into a social network on mobile is just as dicey and uncertain as it has proven to be online. Brands never know exactly what kind of content or exchange is crawling beneath their ads, whether it is a harmless exchange between like-minded home theater enthusiasts or a randy discussion about watching porn on that new HDTV.

Regardless, the advertisers are sure to be in this space, because that is one of the places where mountains of eyeballs are headed even faster than they are embracing mobile TV and other more familiar types of content.

One of the lessons of the Internet circa 2000 is worth remembering on mobile. It is the media companies that want to make phones into another content distribution platform, not the consumers. Back in the day, big media wondered why users had no trouble paying Match.com \$20-\$30 a month for their dating service but wouldn't pony up \$5 a month to get behind an online magazine's subscription wall. People will pay to connect to other people long before they will pay to connect to media companies. Not only that, but they will tell a peer-to-peer service like Match.com or AirG a lot more about themselves, too, because the payoff is a better real relationship to other human being, not a phony "relationship" with marketers.

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