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Foursquare: What and Why?

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Foursquare: What and Why?

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Foursquare in an application that combines social networking, geolocation, and advertising. At its heart, it is a mobile app that 1) encourages users to share their location recommendations with friends, and 2) allows businesses to offer incentives to current and potential customers.

Users may download the app to their mobile device for free. Currently, Foursquare maintains apps on all major mobile platforms and also exists as a website. Because a user typically creates an account and "checks-in" when he or she visits a location, Foursquare works best when a user's mobile device can be geolocated, either through GPS or Wi-Fi capabilities. A check-in on Foursquare lets others in the social network know you are at a physical location and provides further options. The check-in is already a familiar concept for us; after checking into a hotel, you might get local recommendations from the concierge. Similarly, Foursquare generates recommendations and even provides deals and tips. As an added incentive, Foursquare assigns points to each check-in. With each check-in, users can see, scoreboard-style, the points they and their friends have accumulated over the course of a week.

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Figure 1: Foursquare Check In

Foursquare's "Explore" feature provides custom recommendations based on other users' "tips", frequency of check-ins, and whether a user has indicated that they "like" a place. Foursquare might recommend a restaurant based on where your friends have checked in, whether a deal is available to Foursquare users, the popularity of the location, or how new the location is. Businesses (and libraries!) can get in on the game, as well. A business manager starts by claiming the venues he or she manages. From there, a he or she can post local updates, upload photographs, and post "specials". These activities enhance a venue's page and attract users.

Why should libraries care? First of all, if your library is open to the public, there is a good chance that people are already checking into your location via Foursquare. They do this in order

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to earn points and "badges," a Foursquare award for achieving certain goals, such as checking into 50 locations.

Second, libraries can use Foursquare features such as specials and updates to connect with their users. When a user checks in, he or she is automatically notified of the library's active specials and updates.
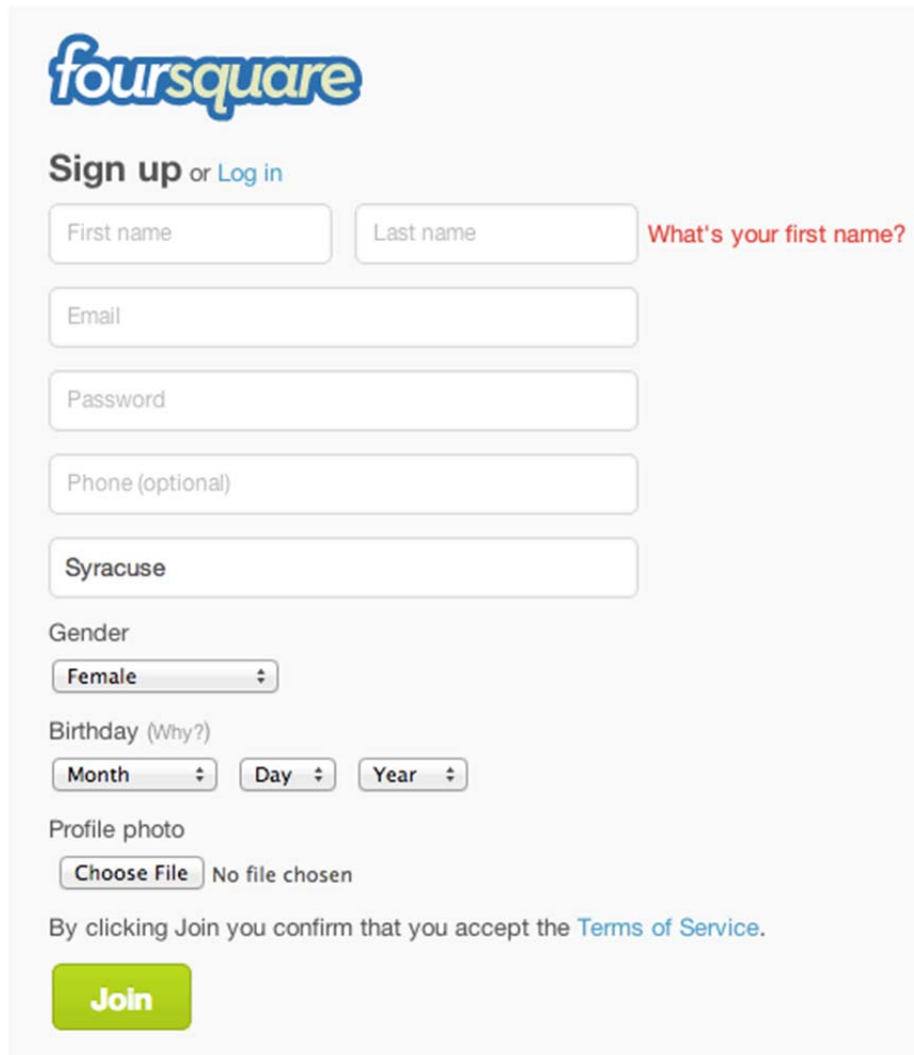
Third, once you claim your library as a venue on Foursquare, you receive a weekly summary of activity, including the number of check-ins your library has received over the past week. Foursquare can serve as another way to view and assess how users interact with the library data.

In this chapter, we will describe 1) how to set up an account and claim your library as a venue, 2) how to effectively populate the outward-facing library venue page, 3) how to use Foursquare for advertising, and 4) how to evaluate its impact. Additionally, we will highlight the New York Public Library as an exemplar of a Foursquare-engaged organization. We will conclude with a set of best practices and recommendations.

How To: Create an Account

To implement Foursquare, a library must first create an account. Visit Foursquare's website, http://www.foursquare.com. Create an account with an email address and a password, as shown in Figure 2, or sign up using an existing Facebook account.

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Figure 2: Sign Up for Foursquare

You can create a new account in the library's name or simply use your own personal account.

You may want to create a general library account separate from your personal account, if you are

already an active Foursquare user. This is particularly relevant if you plan to demonstrate

Foursquare at a meeting or presentation – you might unintentionally show your colleagues where

you checked in last weekend. If you see no need for a separate library account, though, it is not

required. You can assign additional administrators and transfer administrator duties at a later

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time. If you decide to create two accounts, make sure you have a strategy for keeping them separate.

The first time you first log in to Foursquare on the web, you will be given a list of suggestions. These suggestions might be people, brands, or institutions that you may wish to follow. You will also be asked if you would like to add Foursquare to your mobile device. Foursquare currently supports iPhone, Android, Blackberry, Windows Phones, WebOS, Symbian, Series 40, and Meego.

Once you have registered for Foursquare, take some time to use it before moving on to create your venue. If you have only used it on the web, try downloading the app on your mobile device. If you have never used Foursquare for recommendations, try the Explore button on your mobile device or use the web interface to explore venues nearby, as shown in Figures 3 and 4.

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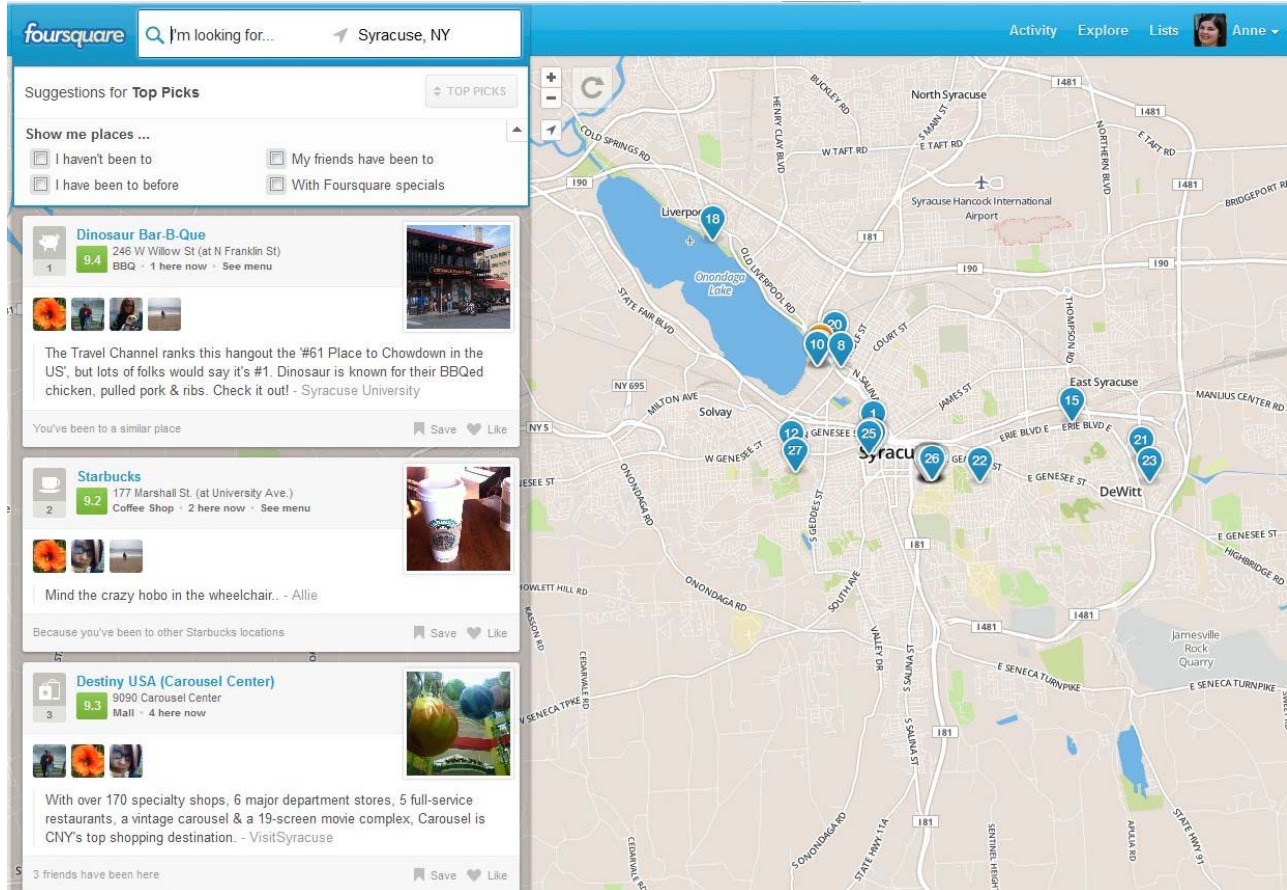
Figure 3: Explore Foursquare with recommended venues

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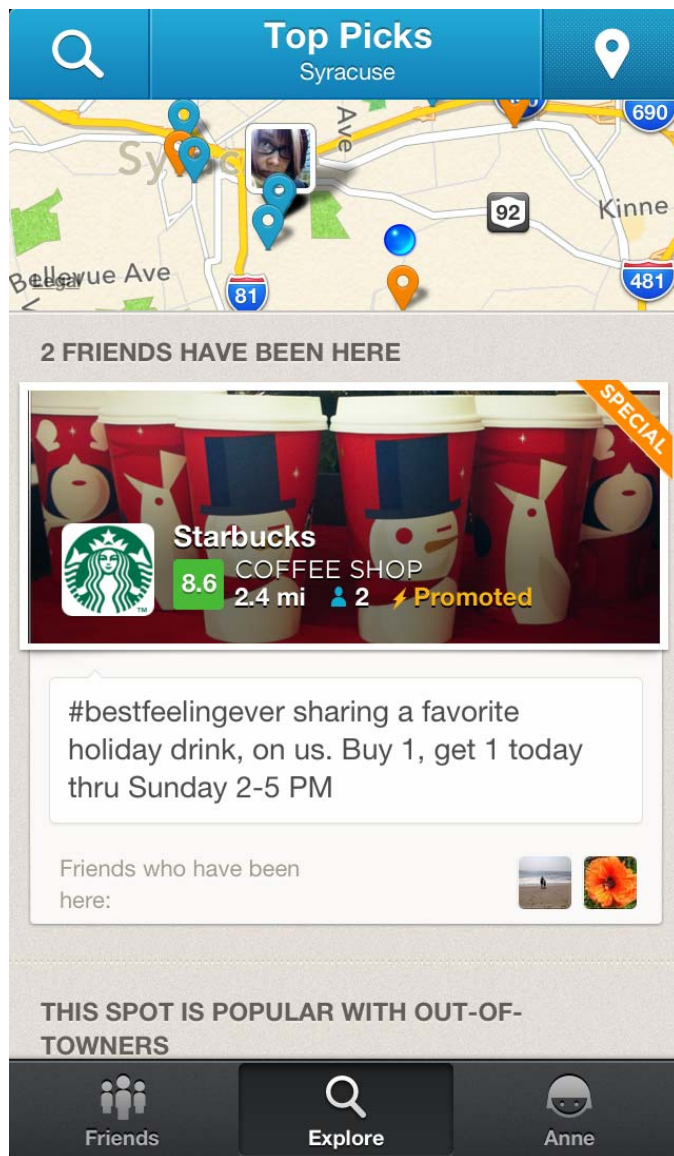
Figure 4: Explore Nearby Locations with the Mobile App

Each time you visit a location that is represented on Foursquare, you will be given the option to check in at those locations. When you check-in, you are notifying other users that you are physically present in that location. Foursquare uses your mobile device's GPS to determine your location. Do not try to check in unless you are at that location, though – Foursquare

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attempts to prevent cheating, using GPS to make sure that the position of your phone corresponds with your check-in location.

While exploring, you may see that for each venue, Foursquare lists the total number of unique users who have checked-in, the total number of times those users have checked-in, and who is currently checked-in at that venue. If you have connected with friends who use Foursquare, you will see if any of your friends have visited that venue. In addition, you will see a mayor listed for each venue. The "mayor" is any user who has checked into that venue the greatest number of times in the past sixty days.

Once you have explored venues and connected with friends, you can begin checking-in at venues and earning points. Points are awarded to Foursquare users for the different activities they perform. Some examples of activities that receive points are checking-in, creating venues, becoming the mayor of a venue, and checking-in with friends at a location together. Along with earning points, users accumulate badges based on their Foursquare activity. Badges can be awarded for the number of points you have accumulated, the frequency with which you check into a category of place, such as university campus locations, or the number of other Foursquare users at a venue with you. The badges in Figures 5, 6, and 7 are three such examples.

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Figure 5: Explorer Badge

Figure 6: Campus Explorer Badge

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Figure 7: Swarm Badge

Organizations are able to design and award their own badges for user activity as NASA did when astronaut Doug Wheelock checked-in from space (Kincaid, 2010). You can see the badges each user has earned when you view their profile along with any tips they have left for other visitors of venues, as shown in Figure 8.

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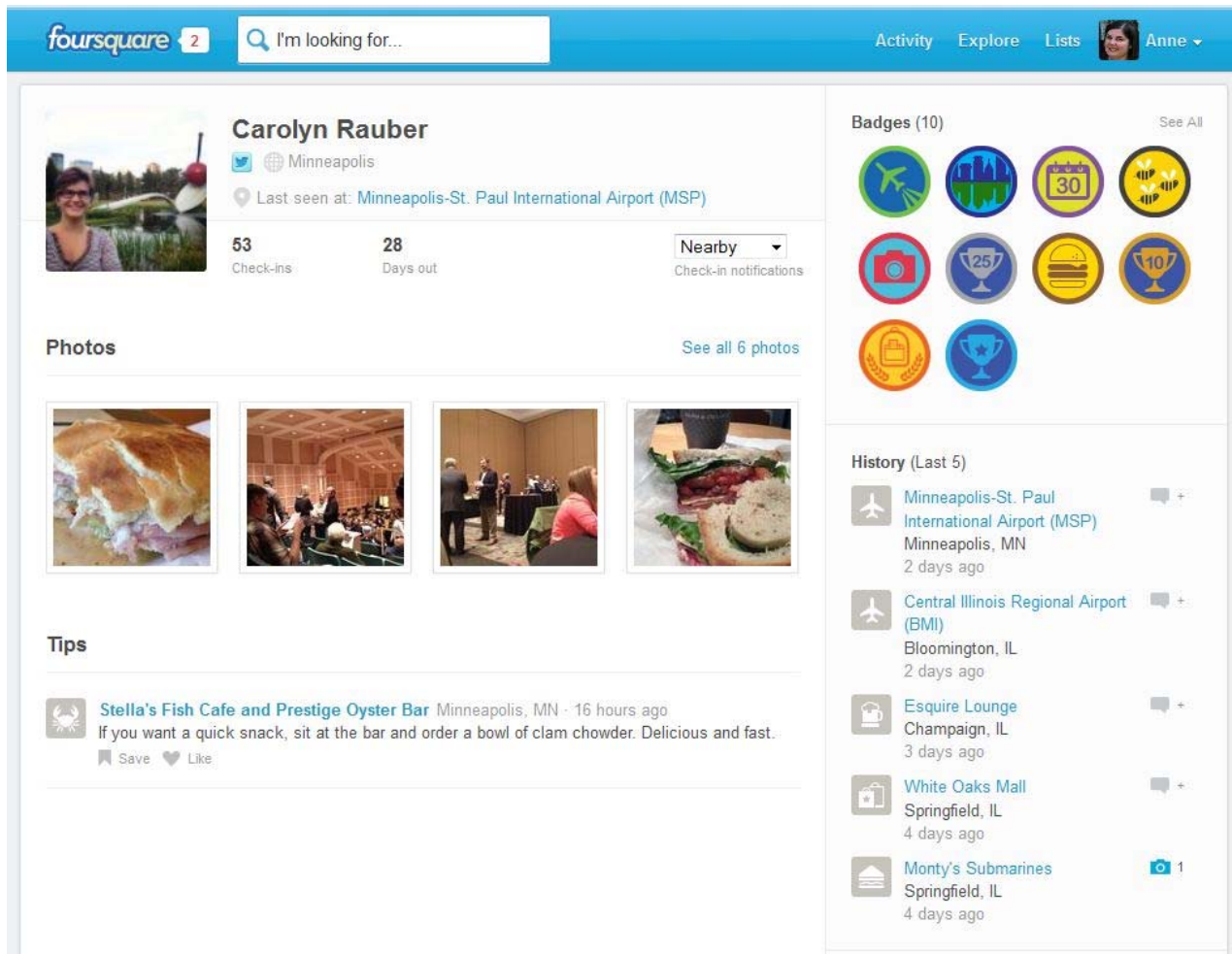
Figure 8: Foursquare Profile with Tips and Earned Badges

Foursquare encourages interactions, allowing both users and venue managers to upload photographs. When a user checks-in at a location, they are automatically given the opportunity to upload a photo, as shown in Figure 9. Even after the user checks in, Foursquare gives them another opportunity to add a photo. Photos add visual impact to every part of the Foursquare experience, which is why photos are so strongly encouraged.

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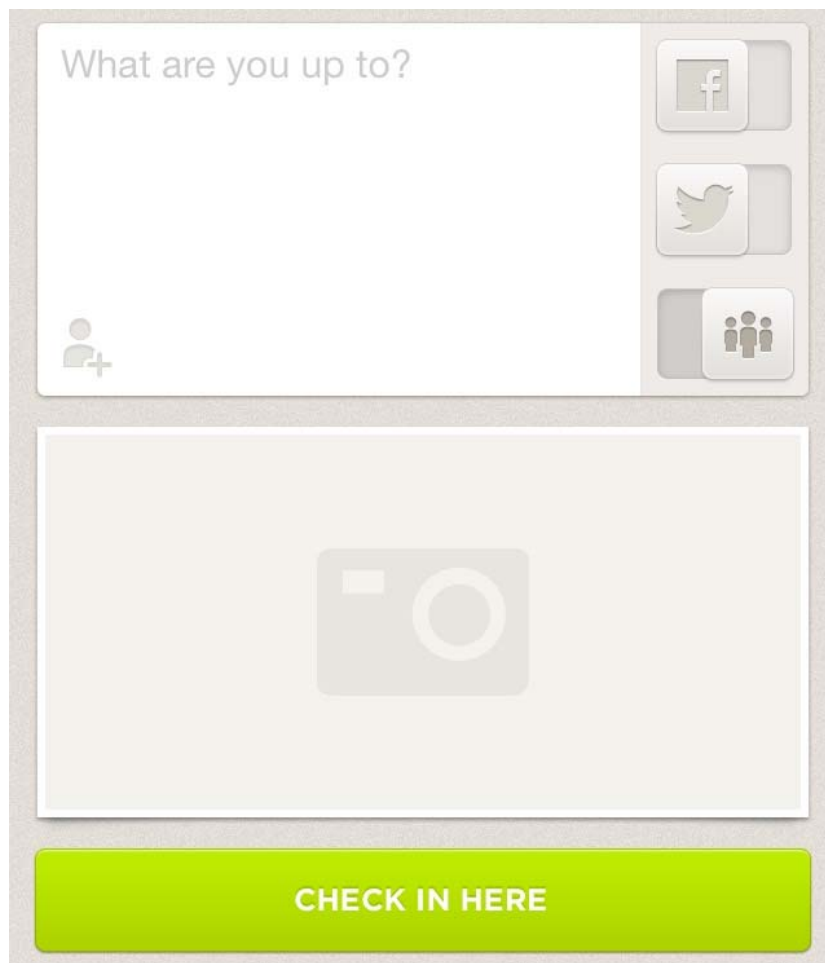
Figure 9: Photo Integration

How To: Populate a Venue

Once you have set up your account and explored Foursquare, it is time to set up your venue. Before creating a location for your library in Foursquare, you should do a search for your library to see if a venue has already been created. Just because your library has not set up Foursquare does not mean that your library is not there or isn't actively being used! Foursquare users can set up locations wherever they like, so be prepared to find venues for different floors or rooms of your library. You can check by searching for your library name – or any nicknames

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your library may have – in either the search bar of the web interface or the search icon in the mobile environment.

If you do not find a location for your library, you will be given the option to "Add a new place to Foursquare," or you can use the Add Venue form at https://foursquare.com/add_venue. Foursquare provides guidelines for adding and editing venue information, which include naming and street address conventions (Foursquare, n.d.-a). Venues with multiple locations or branches, such as public libraries, are discouraged from using suffixes in their location names. Instead of "Municipal Library – Main Branch," for example, Foursquare recommends simply writing "Municipal Library." Many public libraries use suffixes to identify the branch name, but the location description and street address are more appropriate ways to identify the branch. Academic libraries, on the other hand, often have recognizable names, such as Carnegie Library, of the Syracuse University Libraries, shown in Figure 11. In that case, the name of the individual library should be used, rather than the name of the library system. Use common sense when choosing a naming convention – remember, you want your users to recognize the name of your library when they go to check in.

In addition to the style guide, Foursquare has House Rules, a set of community-developed guidelines and best practices. Most of these guidelines are for the end user who will be checking into venues. However, one guideline deals with venue creation etiquette: do not create venues that do not exist. Foursquare is intended to represent only physical locations; tips can be used to represent the events and services taking place there. For example, you can create a venue for your exhibit space, but don't create a venue for the specific exhibit in that space this month (Foursquare, n.d.-b).

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After you add your library or find that your library already exists on Foursquare, you will have to claim it as a venue. Claiming a venue makes you the Foursquare manager of that venue. Once you are the manager of your library, you can change listing information such as address and the hours that your library is open. It also allows you to access analytics about who is checking into your venue and when. To claim your library venue, search for your library's name and look at the venue page. On the bottom of the page will be a link that says, "Do you manage this location? Claim here". This link will take you to a form where you verify that you are an employee of the venue or are working on behalf of the venue. Once you fill out the form, there is a second verification step done either by mail or telephone.

Foursquare provides different forms for claiming one location, ten or more locations, or 100 or more locations. The forms are intended to help managers of multiple venues claim all their locations at once. These forms would be particularly helpful if you have a number of library branches, or multiple locations within your library that you would like to organize under one library system. When filling out a form to claim multiple venues, you will be asked to set up a brand page and enter the Foursquare URLs of the venues that you would like to add to that brand. Your brand page is an overarching page for your organization, like Syracuse University Library (https://foursquare.com/syracuseulib, see Figure 10) which points to all the venues in that organization.

Once you are a verified manager of your library and its venues, it is time to start populating those venues with information. If you set up a brand page, the information you add to that page will also appear on each individual location. It is best to keep the brand information more general and make sure it applies to your entire organization, not just one location. Good

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things to add to your brand page include your library's website, brief information about the library, who can use it, and what patrons can find there.
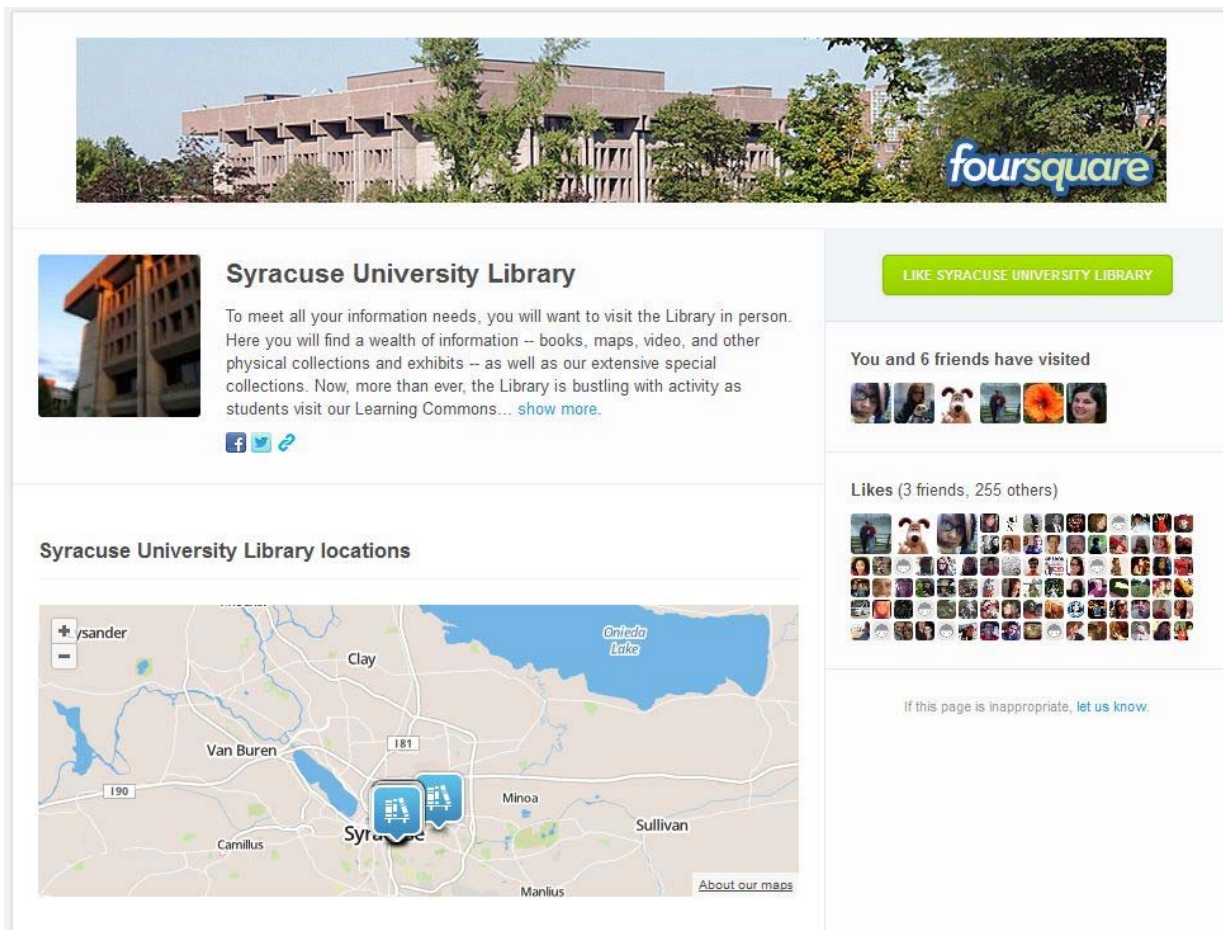
Figure 10: Syracuse University Library Brand Page

You can use the individual venue pages to list hours of each library and the specific collections, services, or resources available there. At Syracuse University Library, different libraries hold different call number ranges, and the range information is included in the venue description, as shown in Figure 11. Syracuse University Library also uses the tips feature to notify patrons of events going on in the library or to respond to user comments. Carnegie Library notifies patrons that calculators are available with the Math Collection, and Bird Library uses tips to respond to check-in comments complaining about noise, pointing patrons to quiet study spaces.

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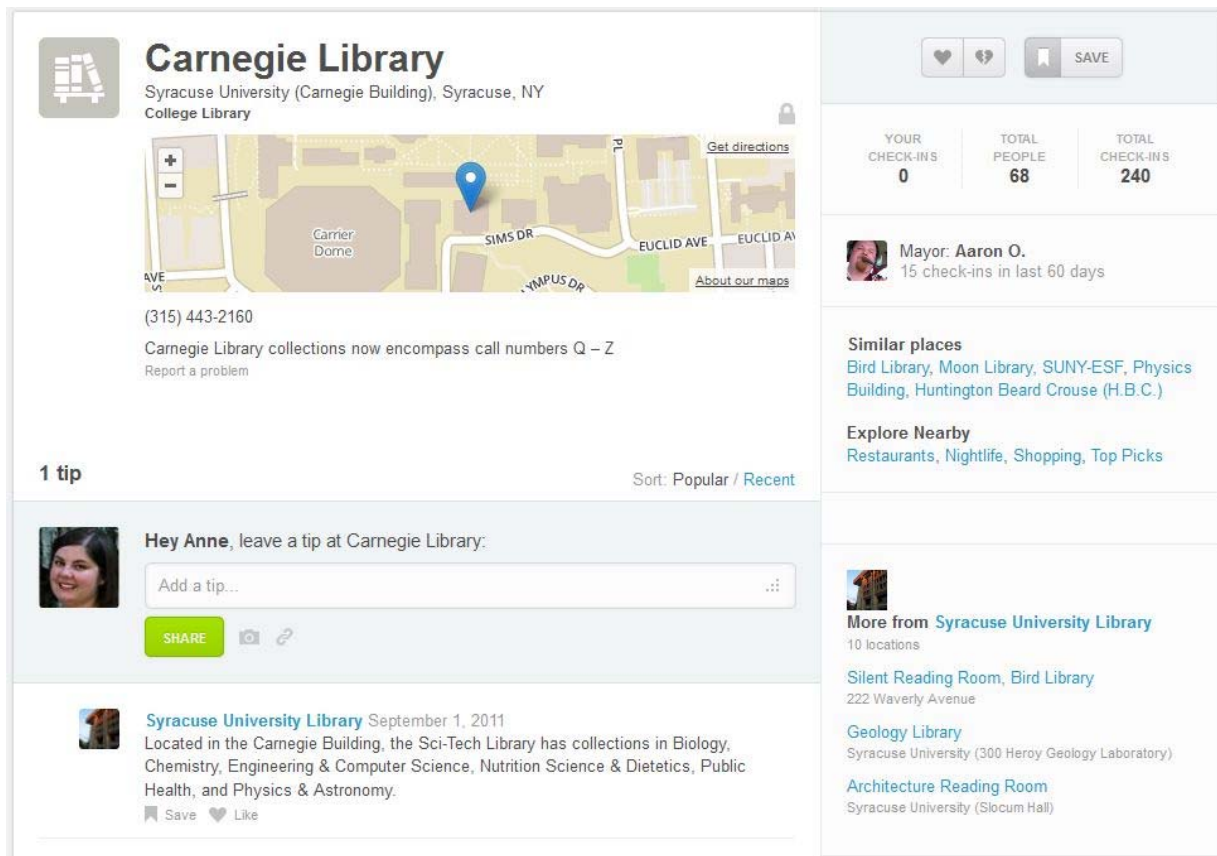
Figure 11: Carnegie Library Venue Page

While setting up your venue pages, you might find duplicate venues. If Foursquare took off in your community or on your campus before your library decided to manage the venues, there might be multiple user-created venues for your library. Maybe they all have the same name, or maybe a nickname was used – "Club Bird" is a popular nickname given to Bird Library at Syracuse University. While editing an individual venue, see the Advanced Tools section for instructions to merge duplicate venue pages. By merging the "Club Bird" venue into the "Bird Library" venue, users who search for "Club Bird" are automatically taken to the Bird Library page to check in there.

Once you have venue pages set up, consider adding a few photos. Libraries can upload photos when leaving a tip, or they can use a feature called "local updates." Updates are just

another way to push information to the users that feature more prominently than tips. An update appears when a user checks into or views the location, and can include an image. Since it is a low-cost means of promotion, any library can quickly add value to its Foursquare page with photos.

Another privilege that you have as a venue manager is to create "specials." A special is a reward that Foursquare users receive for checking into your venue. Specials can be customized; one can be unlocked by every person who checks in to your venue, or you can award specials to loyal visitors after a certain number of check-ins. Examples of specials include discounts for new customers, or a loyalty gift such as your tenth cup of coffee free (Foursquare, n.d.-c).

Libraries should think creatively about how to apply specials to our library venues. In April 2011, University of Southern California Libraries gave a free book to users who checked in at select campus libraries. USC Libraries also offered the libraries' mayors free membership to the Friends of the USC Libraries ("Unlock Foursquare Specials at the USC Libraries"). The University of Kansas Libraries gave away flash drives to users who checked into three campus libraries from August 19, 2011 to September 19, 2011 (Unviersity of Kansas Libraries, 2011). The first example is what Foursquare refers to as a "Check in Special": it is awarded to anyone who checks in. The second example is a "Mayor Special": it is awarded to the mayor. The third is a "Loyalty Special" as it encourages repeat check-ins (Foursquare, n.d.-d).

Navigating all the possibilities can be tricky, but Foursquare has support available. If you have questions or run into problems, visit the Help Center (http://support.foursquare.com) or tweet your question at Foursquare support @4sqSupport.

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How To: Maintain and Advertise

After creating a Foursquare account and taking on the management duties of your venue, it is time to plan how you are going to maintain your venue going forward. By looking at other libraries' Foursquare pages, you will see that there are many different approaches to maintaining this social medial tool. There are libraries that have not claimed their venues, but have created a library account and comment on the activities taking place in their online space. There are libraries that claimed their venues and update the location information, but do not interact with their Foursquare patrons. Finally, there are libraries that frequently interact with patrons and carefully maintain their online locations. All are valid ways of using Foursquare. How you use this tool should be determined by the amount of time you are willing to invest in it and the frequency with which your library users engage with the tool.

If you are ready to fully invest staff time in this tool, fantastic! We have some suggestions for maintaining your venues. These recommendations are all things to consider when engaging library patrons with any social media tool – not just Foursquare. Our first recommendation is to have a back-up plan in case you can no longer manage your library's Foursquare account. If you use a library account, provide login information and training to another staff member. If you use a personal account, add a second administrator to your Foursquare venues. Even if that person is not interested in actively participating in managing your Foursquare engagement, it is a good idea to have someone who can back you up or who can reassign administrator rights to the tool if you change jobs.

Once you have your back-up plan in place, determine what types of interactions you want to or are willing to have on Foursquare. Are you going to offer your own tips, or are you going

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let library patrons leave all the tips for each other? Are you going to engage with patrons who use this space to complain about library services? Are you going to take those complaints as seriously as you would an e-mail? Are you going to address what the library has done to fix those issues there or you are going to publicize the resolutions through another venue?

Additional facets of your management plan should include the frequency and content of your venue's updates. Are you willing to update Foursquare, and any other social medial tools you are using, every time there is a change at your library? If you add a tip about an event at your venue, should you remove it once the event has taken place? If you are concerned about keeping your venue page current, don't include highly variable information, unless you plan to update the page frequently. For example, Syracuse University does not include library hours, which shift at different points in the semester, on each library location in Foursquare. Instead, each venue contains a link to the library website where current hours are always listed on the homepage.

Now that you have your venues set up and plan to keep them up-to-date, it is time to promote your Foursquare presence. You can add a Foursquare badge to your website or include it on your contact page if you list other social media accounts there. You can also place a Foursquare window cling on your library entrance, shown in Figure 1. Foursquare will send you a free window cling when you claim your venue and it will let patrons know that you are participating in Foursquare when they enter your building.

An additional way to promote your presence on Foursquare is to leave tips at other venues when there is a relevant connection between your two venues. If there is an event going in in your community like a theatre production, you can leave a comment at that location pointing visitors to the library to find the book on which the play is based. Similarly, if you see students

complaining about writing a research project in a campus study space, you can remind them to visit the library for research help. Next time a student checks in to that space, they will see your reminder to ask a librarian for help.

How To: Evaluate and Assess

Many of us are familiar with collecting a variety of data for libraries. Circulation numbers, e-resource usage statistics, and library webpage data inform libraries where best to dedicate resources and energy. Foursquare also provides you with data about your venue, and automatically analyzes and displays it graphically. In the same way that circulation statistics can communicate use patterns, Foursquare analytics, provided free of charge, can help your library identify behavior patterns in your Foursquare user population.

It takes some time to accumulate enough data to make full use of the Foursquare analytics features, but when your venue or brand has enough data, the analytics are quite robust. Remember that the data differ from more traditional webpage analytics in two important ways. First, Foursquare does not report interactions with the "page," except to record data about check-ins. It does not track number of photos uploaded over time (though it will tell you when a photo is uploaded) or how many times your venue page was viewed. Second, Foursquare stats are recorded at a much more granular level than traditional usage statistics. You can see a breakdown by gender and how many first-time check-ins occurred over a week. According to Foursquare support, you can expect to see data about:

1) Most recent visitors

2) Most frequent visitors

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3) Time of day people check in

4) Total number of unique visitors

5) Graphics describing check-ins per day

6) Gender and age breakdowns for customers, and

7) The portion of Foursquare check-ins broadcast to Twitter and Facebook (Foursquare, 2010).

To access analytics for your venue or brand, first log in to your Foursquare account. Make sure you're using Foursquare as the location or brand for which you want to see statistics. Hover the mouse over the name in the top right of the screen and select the account you wish to control. The toolbar at the top of the page will contain a "Dashboard" button, as shown in Figure 12. Click the Dashboard to view and download statistics.

Figure 12: Foursquare Toolbar

If you only manage one venue, you will see only the statistics for that venue. If you manage multiple venues, you will see an option to view statistics for one or all venues you manage, as shown in Figure 13.

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Figure 13: Statistics Page for Multiple Venues

The Dashboard provides two statistics categories: Real World Analytics and Long-Term Engagement. Click "View Report," shown in Figure 14, to see detailed statistics in each of these categories. Real World Analytics statistics consist of

1) Total check-ins

2) Number of check-ins shared over Twitter and Facebook

3) Unique customers

4) First-time customers

5) Top visitors

6) Recent visitors

7) Recent Mayors

8) Demographics

Long-Term Engagement statistics include

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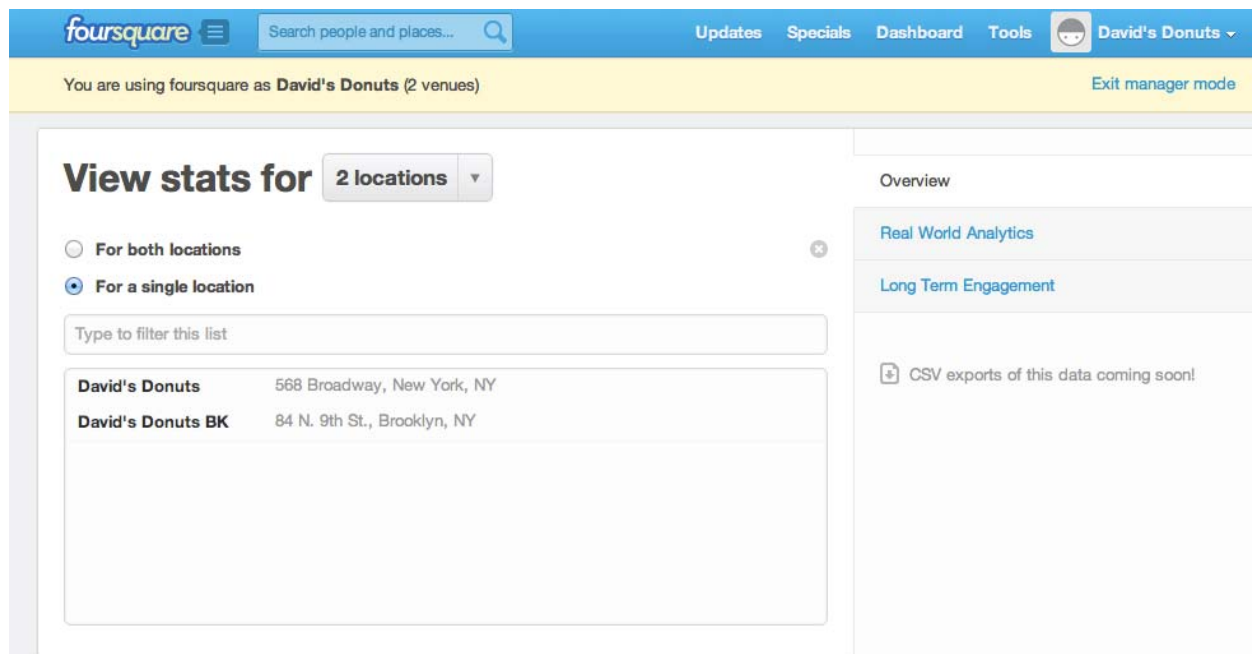
1) People who liked your venue

2) People who liked your updates

3) People who liked your tips
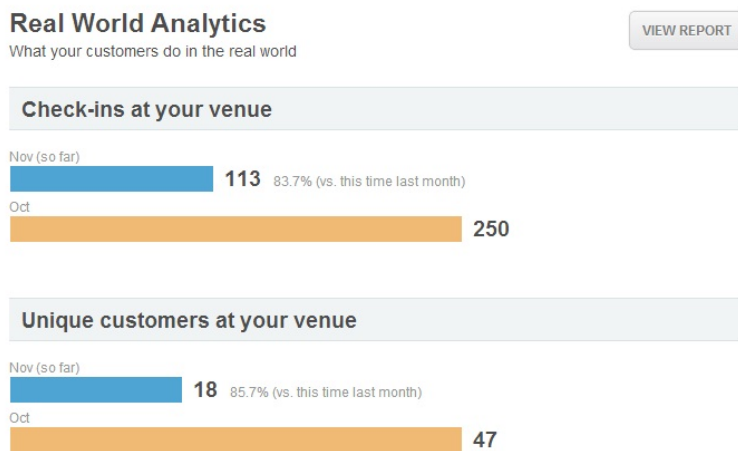
4) People who saved your lists

Figure 14: Example of View Report

Some statistics take time to accumulate, and some require your involvement to create. In order to count people who have liked your updates, for example, you need to have posted some updates. Additionally, Long-Term Engagement statistics will not appear until enough data has been collected.

In addition to viewing analytics through Foursquare.com, weekly stats are delivered to each manager's e-mail address, an example of which is shown in Figure 15. These statistics include total number of check-ins for the week and breakdowns according to day of the week, gender, and the nature of check-in (first-time vs. repeat). These weekly e-mails also identify "top customers" who have checked in most frequently over the last 60 days.

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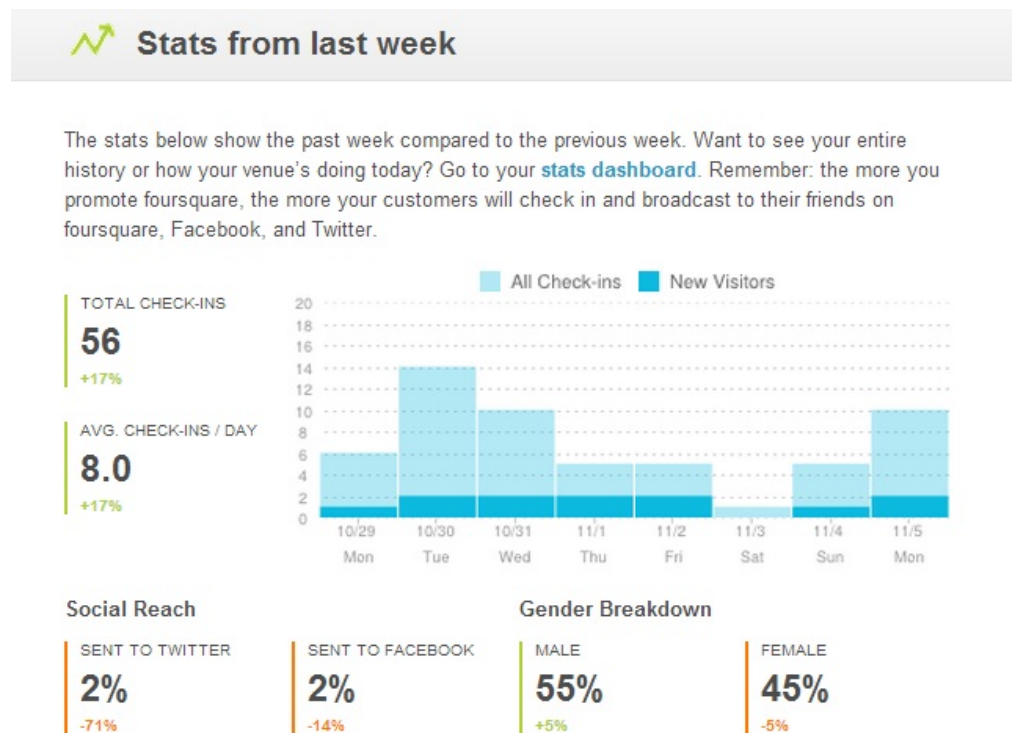
Figure 15: Weekly Statistics E-mail

Foursquare statistics provide hard data about who uses Foursquare in the library, when, and how often. How you assess the impact of Foursquare with these data should be informed by your user population, how they interact with Foursquare, and the questions you are trying to answer. Foursquare's analytics can be used as its own assessment tool, or the statistics can be combined with statistics from other social media platforms. However, using Foursquare statistics on their own to draw far-reaching conclusions, unless the user base is very broad and engaged, is discouraged due to a high likelihood of sampling bias.

On the other hand, these statistics may give some insight into the specific population that uses Foursquare. Noticing patterns related to the number of check-ins per time of day, or per day of the week, may inform decisions about when to offer specials or post local updates. Following that up with other formal or informal assessments, measuring how many specials were redeemed,

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or how users heard about an event or gathering would provide additional insight into how Foursquare is used in your library.

New York Public Library: A Foursquare Success Story

The New York Public Library (NYPL) main branch sits in Midtown Manhattan at the intersection of Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street. The building is a historic and cultural landmark, and attracts many millions of people every year (New York Public Library, 2010). A visitor might pose in a picture next to the famous marble lions guarding the entrance, visit the Main Reading Room and snap an artsy image of the book-lined walls, stop by the gift shop to purchase a finger puppet, or attend a reading by the author Don Delillo in the Celeste Bartos Forum.

Visitors to the New York Public Library main branch have done all these things, leaving a record of their activities on the NYPL's Foursquare venue page. As of this writing, over 21,000 individuals have checked in at the main branch of the Library. The location itself has received more than 34,000 check-ins, and users have uploaded nearly 1,500 photographs taken in or around the library.

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Figure 16: NYPL Venue Page

The New York Public Library is an example of a Foursquare success story. The Library has

engaged in Foursquare at all levels, including

1) Creating a brand for the library system,

2) Claiming and managing each branch library venue page

3) Uploading photographs and adding tips,

4) Creating specials, and

5) Partnering with Foursquare to create a badge.

While these features may not be viable or desirable for every academic, public, school, and

special library interested in using Foursquare to market their services, we have seen that libraries

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have many of the same tools and opportunities available to them. With the Foursquare features previously discussed in mind, let's look at how the NYPL puts it all together.

NYPL has a physical location in Manhattan, open to visitors and members of the public, and wants to market its space and services. However, the Manhattan branch is only one location in a larger library system, so the NYPL System has created a brand page, shown in Figure 17, establishing itself as a one organization.

Additionally, the branch libraries, including the NYPL main branch, are claimed as individual venues. Each branch either could have claimed its library building venue and be added to the NYPL brand, or the NYPL brand could claim each venue. As we have seen, claiming a venue gives its manager control over some of the venue page content, access to the Foursquare analytics, and the ability to add updates and create specials (Foursquare, 2012). NYPL is a contributor on its own venue page, uploading photographs, adding tips about the location, and posting local updates.

Users can "like" the NYPL's brand page, an equivalent to "following" on Twitter or "liking" on Facebook. When users like the page, events and specials the NYPL System promotes will appear on their activity feed. On the brand page, the NYPL's locations are visible, as are tips and photographs uploaded from all of its branches.

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Figure 17: NYPL Brand Page

On the individual venue pages, similar information is available, including the position of the venue on a map, photos, and tips about that location. Visitors to the main branch of the NYPL have left many tips about the building's architecture, the availability of free Internet access, and even how to move chairs silently in the reading room. NYPL has written its share of tips, including one tip advertising tours.

The NYPL main branch page highlights an active special that the Library is promoting. The NYPL offers a special for every check-in, a 10% discount on purchases in the gift shop. For libraries without a gift shop, a little creativity must be employed to make use of specials, but as long as staff members are aware of Foursquare specials, they could be applied to anything from coffee shop purchases and ticketed events, to Friends of the Library memberships.

In 2011, NYPL was the first library to offer a Foursquare badge, celebrating the Library's 100th anniversary (New York Public Library, 2011). The "NYPL Centennial" badge is awarded to Foursquare users who check in at three NYPL branches or check in to the main branch five times. Foursquare is extremely selective in the badges they choose to support, and they do charge for the creation of a badge, but if your library can pitch a compelling reason why Foursquare should partner with you, that option is open.

The NYPL main branch is a strong example of a successful Foursquare page, and libraries should adapt its success, and the successes of other libraries, to their own user population and library spaces. Foursquare encourages users to interact with the unique attributes of individual locations, and the candid nature of users' tips and photos allow library staff to see through the eyes of their most loyal and engaged patrons.

Recommendations and Best Practices

Throughout this chapter, the authors have made some suggestions for how to best use Foursquare in a library. We would like to reiterate some of those points here, as well as provide additional suggestions for making the most of this tool. When setting up a Foursquare

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management plan at your library, be sure more than one person can edit your Foursquare venues, in the case that the primary manager is unavailable or changes jobs.

While Foursquare provides many statistics on your venue's use, be sure to remember the limitations of these statistics, and be wary of using them on their own for large-scale assessment and decision-making. Using these statistics is a good way to understand how your Foursquare users interact with your virtual and physical venue but until you reach a critical mass of users, like the NYPL has, the user base might be too small to draw widespread conclusions. Consider combining Foursquare statistics with other types of assessment to make decisions for your library. You may even want to follow up with additional assessment of your Foursquare users to further understand their motivations for using the tool and how it enhances their library experience.

One of the best features of Foursquare for libraries is the ways in which it incentivizes users to interact with your venue. Foursquare motivates users to accumulate points and earn badges by checking in; they are gaining something from interacting with your library venue without necessarily requiring you to provide additional incentives. Foursquare is a great marketing tool for libraries as well. In the Foursquare environment, an engaged business makes for a more engaged patron, and it's easy for libraries to get in on the game.

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