Can’t Find a Parking Space? This App Can Help

Urban regions enjoy density. It’s what makes for serendipity — running into someone you know in a crowd of strangers is all the more meaningful. It can also make certain infrastructures more efficient. The vast number of people cycling in and out of subways, coffee shops and freeway lanes is the grounds for an amazing data set, if those people will agree to contribute to apps such as Foursquare [1] or Waze [2].

But, as much as we love the idea of democracy and helping out our neighbor, it turns out crowdsourcing will not solve all problems. While most drivers will log the gas price they are paying while waiting for their tank to be filled, app developers found that people are less likely to open an app to announce they’re unoccupying a parking spot as they pull out to drive to the next destination. A solution not so dependent on personal whims would be needed. That’s where technology comes into play.

Where Crowdsourcing Works

Cities can use crowdsourcing to improve the region for people who live there. SeeClickFix [3] enables citizens to report potholes, graffiti or other issues so city planners can get a better sense of where improvements are needed. Another app, GasBuddy [4], relies on drivers to report gas prices at local gas stations so fellow drivers can navigate to the cheapest or nearest station. Waze has literally built maps based on 100% crowdsourced data in some countries, along with ongoing use of crowdsourcing for traffic information.

GasBuddy also gets pricing from stations, and Waze has made use of census data maps when available, but the ongoing engagement of users is what makes the apps valuable for other users. This is a much-desired network effect, and once a product engages its users in this way, it’s much more difficult for a competitor to solve the

same problem successfully.

In cities, one problem that begs to be solved is how to find a parking spot quickly and easily. City parking can be difficult to navigate and is often costly. While you might estimate the distance to your destination to be 10 minutes, it could take an extra 10 minutes, or more, to find an available parking spot. That’s time, gas and money wasted.

One app, iSpotSwap [5], attempted to bring crowdsourcing’s strength in numbers to parking. The company website encourages users, “Remember: Tagging Spots = Finding Spots.” This sums up both the potential and the limitation of a crowdsourced app — for it to work, lots of people have to use it. The app has not been updated since 2010.

One company is relying on sensors instead of well-meaning citizens to tell you where to park. Instead of depending on users to drive its data, Streetline [6] went directly to stakeholders — including city governments and commercial garages — for partnerships.

Types of Data Collected

When finding the right gas station relies on real-time pricing and location, parking relies on real-time availability and location, but it doesn’t stop there. Streetline CEO Zia Yusuf says, “What we are seeking to do is build a smart parking platform, and that platform is based on data.”

The four data types Yusuf notes can be plotted on two axis of a graph: there is on-street and off-street parking along one axis, and parking policy and real-time information on the other axis. These axes create four different boxes of parking

situations. What time you can park due to street sweeping would be policy data and on-street parking box, while the number of open spots inside a parking garage would be in the real-time information and off-street parking box. All of this data is collected with Streetline’s sensors, which are installed in parking spots, and through partnerships with many cities, including Indianapolis, Fort Lauderdale and Los Angeles, and companies, including IBM, Siemens, Xerox, Telefonica and Citibank.

“Our on-street sensors are a critical source of new data,” Yusuf says. “One of the things that we’re very proud of is we’ve built up a fantastic ecosystem of partners that we go to market with.”

Los Angeles actually changes the pricing of its parking spots dynamically based on supply, to optimize revenue. This optimization of revenue makes Streetline a great partner for cities and has fueled the company’s rapid expansion.

Making Data Useful

Streetline’s data is collected into APIs, and relayed to users through its apps. Parker [7] is the company’s consumer app, and if Streetline is in your city, you can see where parking spots are available and other information including pricing. ParkEdge [8] is a parking platform for garages, which is used to manage reservations and coupons, among other things. ParkSight [9] is a parking platform for cities, which supplies analytics through its partnership with IBM. In the future, Streetline is also looking to partner with university and corporate campuses.

But outside of its own applications, Streetline plans to open up the use of its data.

“We’re definitely in discussion with app companies and several automotive companies, because ultimately the stuff belongs in in-car navigation,” Yusuf says.

Another possible use of parking data is audio directions so the driver doesn’t need to look down at a map. VoicePark [10] is an app that provides a voice guide to available parking spots in San Francisco and utilizes data collected by the city. Founder David LaBua says the company plans to add more cities in an update in December.

“You’re going to see this whole topic of smart cities more and more,” Yusuf says. “[It's] innovation that actually impacts the day-to-day lives of people, and this is what attracted us to this market.”

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