Baseball Demos Location Tech with Apple's iBeacon

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New York (AP) — As good as GPS is at helping smartphones guide you, the technology isn't very precise and doesn't work reliably indoors.

Apple is trying to improve that with a new iBeacon system, which comes with last week's iOS 7 software update for iPhones and iPads.

Better location information will improve a range of features, including recommendations based on what's popular nearby. It will also enable ads and coupons from nearby retailers and potentially allow mobile ordering and other transactions.

The technology also promises to work better indoors, particularly in multi-story environments such as shopping malls and stadium concourses.

Major League Baseball showcased some of iBeacon's potential Thursday in front of about a half-dozen journalists at Citi Field, home of the New York Mets. MLB's free At The Ballpark app can customize fans' experience from the moment they get off the subway or out of their cars.

For instance, MLB officials showed how its app can offer bonus features such as video when fans are within a few feet of landmarks. The stadium map is customized based on the entrance used and the fan's seat, and a coupon pops up the moment the fan walks into a souvenir shop.

Phones can do some of this now, but not as well.

Eric O'Brien, director of wireless product development for baseball's interactive

business, MLB Advanced Media, said the new technology is precise enough to deliver coupons right at the door, not 10 feet past the store.

He said GPS technology can be a half-mile or so off at times, and supplemental location technology such as cellular and Wi-Fi signals are more complicated to configure. With iBeacon, a handful of sensors are placed around the stadium to enable specific functions.

So far, Apple has said little publicly about iBeacon, other than that it uses a low-energy variant of Bluetooth wireless technology to pick up data from sensors, or beacons. Apple recently released technical specifications for software developers such as MLB to incorporate the technology into apps.

MLB officials temporarily installed several beacons around Citi Field for Thursday's demonstration. It plans to use the technology more extensively next season. Each ball club is expected to adopt its own set of features based on its fan base and stadium configuration.

The beacons will work with the iOS version of At The Ballpark.

The Android app won't get the new features initially, but O'Brien said the 4.3 version of Android has a way to use Bluetooth to determine location. That version came out in July and is in only a few devices, including Google's Nexus 7 tablet.

Fans can already use either app at stadiums to upgrade seats, buy copies of songs played over the loudspeakers and view maps and menus for vendors. A few stadiums even allow fans to order food and merchandise from seats.

O'Brien said iBeacon could eventually improve those features by letting the vendor know, for instance, where the fan is sitting without needing to enter the seat number.

Using iBeacon, MLB's app could also keep track of visits, even if the fan didn't check in or open the app. That way, it can extend different types of offers to first timers and regulars.

Those worried about privacy will be able to turn off location services for the entire device or for specific features. MLB also plans to offer additional settings in its app. Officials say the idea is to keep it to features fans want.

"We want to help out fans," O'Brien said. "We don't want to creep them out."

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