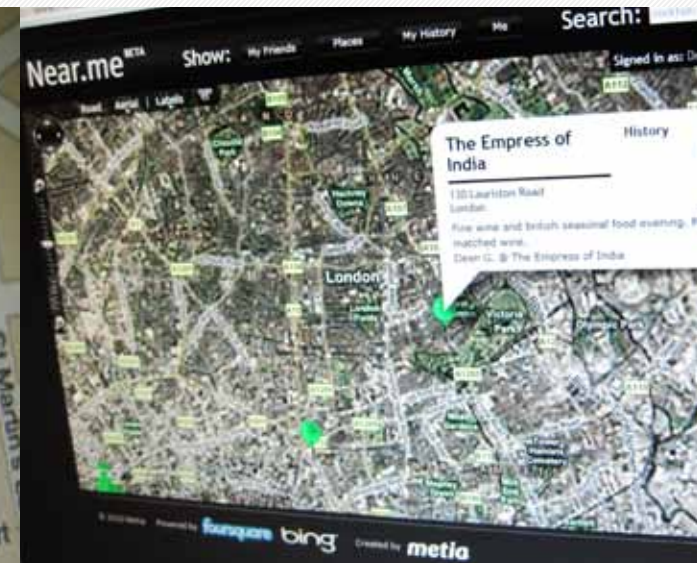


Near.me helps marketers to envision how APIs can be used to create new customer services



Application programming interfaces (APIs) aren't much of a topic of daily discussion among marketers. But this should be about to change. The creative use of APIs, and also the reliable provisioning of APIs to third parties, will have a radical effect upon marketers' ability to reach and serve their customers.

Near.me is a Metia Labs project which was designed to help our clients understand the possibilities which APIs offer them. Near.me envisions a simple added value service by converging different APIs within an intuitive user interface.

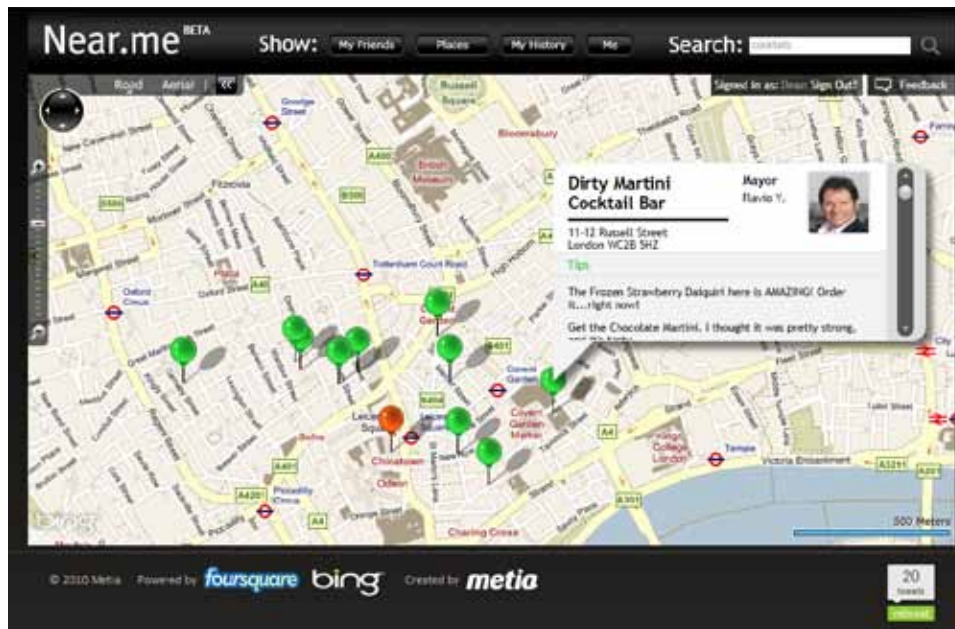
Near.me gives users the ability to pinpoint their location on maps, and visualise their position in relation to their friends and places of interest. Using a Microsoft Silverlight based user interface, Near.me mixes geo-location data from the APIs provided by Microsoft Bing Maps and the social network Foursquare.

Near.me gives users a visual tool that helps them locate friends

Microsoft Silverlight is used to provide an elegant, interactive interface

Building services with APIs can open up new business opportunities

APIs offer developers the ability to build innovative applications quickly



Objectives

Once the exclusive preserve of software businesses, today many types of organisations are releasing application programming interfaces (APIs) to enable third party developers to incorporate into their own applications or services. In return, the organisations provisioning these web services benefit from more delivery channels and communities of third party developers thinking up innovative ways to package, present and add value to their service.

To illustrate this trend, Metia Labs developed Near.me as part of a project to demonstrate the way multiple APIs can be used to create simple but user-friendly interactive applications. Near.me is both an envisioning exercise to help our clients understand the potential of APIs and a knowledge building experience to gather best practices on building robust and secure services using third party APIs.

Visual mapping tool

Near.me extends a series of recent social networking innovations. It uses a combination of existing web based resources or social utilities to enable people to quickly locate friends or venues anywhere in the world. When users log in to the application, Near.me pinpoints their position on a map.

With a single click, users see a view of the latest locations recorded by their friends on the same map, or with options to view an aerial satellite image. Users can then search for nearby destinations, such as coffee shops or retail stores, or recommend venues close to the current location of friends. The application is a simple way of helping people visualise both their and their friends' favourite locations.

Near.me was built using Microsoft Silverlight, a browser plug-in comparable to Adobe Flash. Using Silverlight, the Metia Labs team designed a seamless user interface, with interactive features exploiting the strengths of Silverlight such as Deep Zoom, that was used to help users explore their location or that of their friends in detail.

Developing with APIs

To create Near.me, Metia Labs worked with the API of location-based social network Foursquare, which, for the purposes of a rapid proof of concept, also provided a ready-made community of thousands of users already actively sharing their locations online.

Participants use Foursquare to share information about where they are with their friends, using the application on their phone to "check in" to new places or venues, such as hotels or restaurants, and leave tips and recommendations. Foursquare also incorporates social gaming elements, with users collecting points and coupons as they frequent particular destinations. With user numbers growing rapidly since launch, Foursquare is also beginning to open up relevant services for businesses as a means of marketing and promotion through special deals and the like for regular customers.

The Metia Labs team used the Foursquare API as it was intended by the internet company's developers and created a new way to present the data generated by the Foursquare



community. Dean Gifford, interactive lead in the Metia Labs team, says: "We have taken the details offered by the social network and pinned them to maps so Near.me users can visualise their position in relation to that of their friends or places around them."

Weaving in geolocation technology

The team then added information from an API provided by Microsoft's mapping platform, Bing Maps, to display data showing the user's exact position. The positioning function is enabled by use of geo-location, which identifies the exact location of the user's mobile phone or internet-connected computer, and translates it into meaningful information such as a street address, rather than a basic set of co-ordinates. Geo-location is also being actively adopted by organisations which recognise huge marketing possibilities in being able to identify the whereabouts of consumers via geo-location features in mobile phones.

Mark Mower, technical lead, Metia Labs, explains that the Near.me project demonstrates how, working with APIs, it is possible for developers to build simple, user-friendly applications which can offer real value to individuals and businesses alike, and to do so incredibly quickly. "By using APIs, developers can take advantage of the tools and services other people have already created to build new, innovative solutions quickly. As a proof of concept we were able to put the Near.me application together in just a week or so."

As a proof of concept exercise Near.me has already served its purpose for Metia's customers, leading to conversations about where and how they can, either build applications using APIs and consuming publicly available services, or in other situations offer their own information resources to third party developers. In addition, working with APIs in a live production environment generated practical experience that has been captured and feedback into best practice learnings to the broader development teams within Metia.

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