tl;dr for Marketers

Location-Based Advertising Measurement Guidelines

Media Ratings Council
March 2017

FOURSQUARE
LOCATION INTELLIGENCE

The tl;dr for Marketers

At the end of March 2017, the Media Ratings Council released the MRC Location Based Advertising Measurement Guidelines. Because we, at Foursquare, spend a lot of time thinking about location data, and we also offered input as one of the leading companies in the space, we closely reviewed all 45 pages.

We know not everyone has the time to spend digging through the details, so we thought we'd publish a TL;DR (Too Long; Didn't Read) version to call out some of the key points from the document and how to best interpret their meaning.

As you'll see, we've included direct quotes from the MRC's guidelines and added a bit of how these points should be considered by marketers. This document isn't intended to editorialize about our products (in fact we don't mention them at all) because we can do that in a meeting or if you email us.

Rather, we know that we can help the busy marketer or media executive with a summary of key points on an important topic for the industry.

Overview

The goals of the MRC's Location-Based Advertising Measurement Guidelines are stated as:

1. Provide for consistent set of definitions for key elements of location based measurement
2. Recommend minimum disclosures which should be provided to measurement data users
3. Provide a clear statement of recommended research operating practices and quality and describe minimum requirements as well as best practices
4. Encourage experimentation and advances to improve audience research quality

The document begins with a standardization of terms that are germane to both the media and advertising industry broadly, and location specific terms such as 'geo-fence' and 'visit.'

We've called out some of the key point from the sections that follow. You'll see we've sourced all quotes with the section and page number.

Key Points

MOBILE IS A UNIQUE MEDIUM, LET'S ALL ACT ACCORDINGLY

"The 'best' methods and approaches to measure the audience of any media are driven by the nature of the medium, its environment, its mode(s) of delivery and how its audience consumes and interacts with the medium."
section 1, page 4 (MRC)

Since 2007 (the dawn of the smartphone) the industry has pretty much been treating mobile as a smaller screen than PC or television and replicating strategies from those two channels. Marketers and their agencies should consider what makes the digital experiences unique to the medium, namely the geo-awareness and the sensors in the phone.

WITHOUT ACCESS TO THE SENSORS ON THE PHONE, YOU'RE FLYING BLIND

"Consideration should be given to not only the data collection techniques and fields used to determine location, but also other validation and quality control considerations such as altitude for places with multiple floors as well as speed or longitudinal analysis of location to differentiate a visit from a "drive-by" or other types of momentary proximity not meeting the requirements of a visit."
section 3, page 12 (MRC)

Marketers should consider how location vendors are collecting data and accounting for the complexities of measuring location signals in dense urban areas. If you're not able to use things like the accelerometer and other sensors to measure stops and dwell time at a location, you're only getting part of the picture when it comes to measuring visits. If you want to understand floors in a building, a satellite picture won't work. You need bluetooth and wifi signals, and that means having access to those sensors with software on the device.

IF YOU'RE PAYING FOR RAW VISITS, YOU'RE OVERPAYING

A user should only be counted once for unique measurement, despite the fact that a user can have multiple visits during a reporting period.
section 5, page 19 (MRC)

Marketers should make sure that any location partner's billing and reporting is reflective of unique visitors and total visits when location specific metrics are applied to campaign measurement. We think the best way to measure campaign success is by incremental visit lift rather than total visits (how do you know someone wasn't going to go to a location anyways?). But that's just us.

A MOMENT DOES NOT A MEASUREMENT TOOL MAKE

Location measurement data accuracy may vary depending on whether the data collection technique consists of snapshot or point in time data compared to behavioral analyses over time.

Likewise, if advertising information (such as bid requests) is used to assign location, the time lag between ad-exposure and proximity indication should be considered.
section 5, page 20 (MRC)

Advertisers should carefully consider weaknesses in location data from a "snapshot" (bidstream or third party logs) approach, versus "always on" stop detection. To detect real stops at specific brand locations, you have to see true stops as opposed to the drive-by or walk-by false positives that are common in a snapshot approach. Snapshot cannot leverage accelerometer and dwell time signals, for instance.

FIRST PARTY GROUND TRUTH, OR BUST

Measurement vendors are encouraged to obtain first-party "ground truth" data under conditions as close as possible to those in real-world use to verify accuracy of measurement against such data.
section 5, page 22 (MRC)

Listening to a set of geo-coordinates isn't enough to understand the device's real world location. A lot of the time using location data for marketing is about understanding the exact place someone has walked into or the types of places they spend their time rather than a Lat/Long. Without a first party data set to compare that string of Lat/Long numbers to, there will be false positives and media waste in your campaign.

BEWARE OF SERVER SIDE COUNTING

These guidelines rely on the central concept that counting should initiate on the client side, not the server side (measurement counting may happen at the server side as long as it is initiated based on client-side events.), and that counting should occur as close as possible to the delivery of an advertisement or content to the measured user.
section 6, page 25 (MRC)

Device level data (client side) should be the foundation of all measurement for marketing and advertising purposes. Full stop.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY OF THE BIDSTREAM WILD WILD WEST

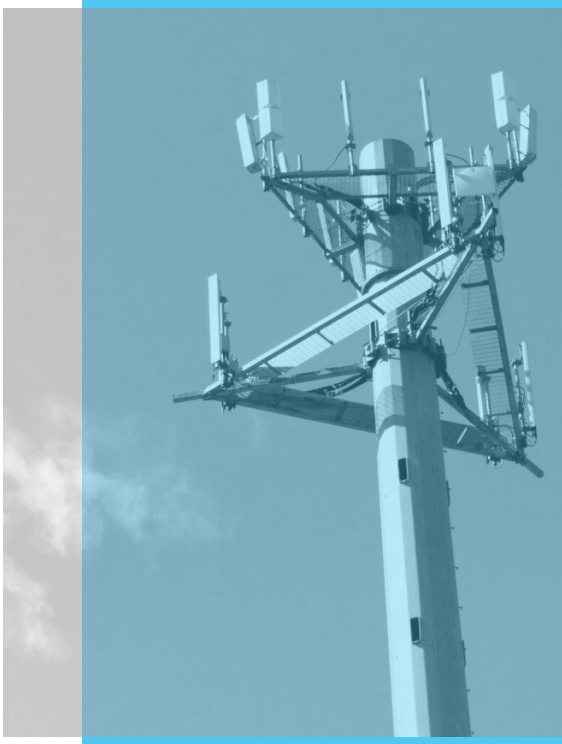
Vendors using ad or bid request data for location determination are strongly encouraged to also employ alternate data sets and algorithms to detect patterns of inaccurate/fraudulent location data and filter it out, with empirical support and disclosure.
section 6, page 27 (MRC)

The fundamental difference between all location-based media organizations comes down to how we analyze and filter out the good, the bad, and the ugly sources of data from the noisy bidstream. Marketers should pay close attention to the methodology of location partners because if they're not filtering properly, you're paying for a lot of mistargeted impressions.

PSA: IT'S 10PM, DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR LOCATION SIGNALS ARE COMING FROM?

Location parameters passed may represent current, home, work or last-known location or may represent the location of a fixed point such as a cellular network antenna or even the geographic center of a city. These values should be understood and considered appropriately in measurement and reporting. Further, the type of attribute (method of collection) and relative accuracy and precision can be included and should be factored into location determination where available.
section 6, page 27 (MRC)

Not all location signals being added to ad calls are created equal. There is a large disparity in how consumer location at the time of an ad call is added across the media landscape. The center point of a city, the last location of a device, or where a cell tower is located simply aren't good enough. But signals like that are being used in ad calls and called the "location" of a consumer. Marketers should pay special attention to the filtration mechanism of the bidstream because close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.



BAD LOCATION DATA IS THE NEW CLICKBOT

As ad or bid request data may be subject to manipulation and may carry differing levels of accuracy and precision (depending on the source and method used to derive and transmit location data), it should also be subject to robust validation edit rules/qualifying criteria. The use of multiple data sources to corroborate and inspect ad or bid request data and accuracy/precision parameter requirements is encouraged.
section 6, page 27 (MRC)

The bidstream is full of inaccuracies for a variety of reasons including lack of attention to location data accuracy and even outright manipulation. That means determining the validity of a publisher's location data is only as good as the first party ground truth dataset you're using for comparison. The implication for marketers is that if you're building audience segments, measuring media efficacy or trying to derive consumer insights from sources based on faulty location data, there is going to be less signal than noise.

GEO-FENCES ONLY GET YOU A PIECE OF THE LOCATION PIE

It is important to validate that the geo-fence representation accurately reflects not just the location and dimension of the physical place, but accounts for how a mobile device would report its location when at that place, to ensure correct conclusions about visitation. In general geo-fencing cannot represent multi-story structures.
section 6, page 33 (MRC)

Your mobile device does not perceive the world as boxes and rectangles, but rather as a mix of signals that shift due to a variety of factors. GPS strength fluctuates when a device is inside (ever seen the blue dot in the middle of the street when you're inside?). The implication for marketers is that geo-fencing may work in some instances, but will struggle to accurately define dense areas or represent verticality in building. Location data needs to account for these kind of fluctuations using sensors from the device over time to build a more accurate picture of how the device perceives a place.

BYE, IP GEODATA

Regardless of which methodology is used, location derived from device-level location services should be used to identify user's device location with respect to geo-fenced locations and less precise data, such as IP, should be avoided.
section 6, page 33 (MRC)

R.I.P. geodata via IP.

CONSUMER OPT-IN FOR THE WIN

Use of clear opt-in practices is required and vendors are encouraged to establish first-party relationships for collection of location data where feasible.
section 7, page 36 (MRC)

Marketers should be wary of any publisher or partner who does not have a clear opt-in mechanism for the collection of their location datasets. Location data sets built on shady collection techniques are a house of cards that will eventually come tumbling down.

USING LOCATION WITHOUT A CLEAR USER VALUE PROPOSITION IS A PII DISASTER WAITING TO HAPPEN

Finally, if a vendor or application collects data that is intended to be used for behavioral analysis to determine home location or other user location heuristics, this must be made known to users as part of permissions, terms and conditions and privacy policies. Tracking location throughout a day and combining sessions to determine location has privacy implications that must be considered in disclosures and user-facing policies or terms and conditions.
section 7, page 37 (MRC)

Always-on location tracking must be clearly defined as part of the terms of service to ensure privacy policies are reflective of this level of PII. Marketers should consider what user value is being provided by apps and services that ask for always-on location tracking. Is it a core part of app functionality, or a mechanism for covertly gathering data on unsuspecting consumers? As location becomes more important in the media ecosystem, this question will become more important for brands to consider because if someone isn't signing up for always-on location as a core part of the product, you're using a lot of personal information without their knowing consent.