

MANAGING YOUR CAREER

The CEO Who Knows Where You've Been

Foursquare's Jeff Glueck helped turn the social media app into a window on consumer desire; 'I thought my job was to just mow down any opposition'

By Francesca Fontana

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In his younger days, Jeff Glueck assumed he would go into politics, but the fast-paced nature of the private sector proved too enticing for the Foursquare CEO.

A White House fellow under President Bill Clinton, Mr. Glueck worked on climate and clean energy policy before he stumbled into founding an internet startup in 1999 with another White House fellow, Michelle Peluso. Travelocity acquired their online travel company, Site59.com, three years later for \$43 million, giving him a taste of how satisfying rapid results in the corporate world can be.

Mr. Glueck stayed on at Travelocity as chief marketing officer and launched its famous ad campaign featuring a world-traveling gnome. Today, he is leading Foursquare into a new space. Launched in 2009 as a social-media network that allowed users to check in to bars and restaurants—and share their locations with friends—Foursquare has pivoted to selling data and software to companies, helping power the location capabilities of Uber, Twitter, Samsung and Tencent.

Mr. Glueck recently talked to The Wall Street Journal. Here are edited excerpts:

WSJ: What insights have you brought to Foursquare from your time as a chief marketing officer?

Mr. Glueck: As a CMO spending a billion dollars, I could understand whether my ads were working or not by using internet cookies [to track customer choices]. In the real world, there is no cookie. Foursquare can understand the 90% of commerce that still happens in the real world, in grocery stores and restaurants and retailers. As a platform, we can help companies understand

how people move through the real world and understand the impact of their advertising on foot traffic [by measuring visits at brand locations, for instance].

You know the old John Wanamaker quote: “Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is, I don’t know which half.” We can find out which half.

WSJ: The ethics of user privacy have become a more salient issue for consumers. What’s your view?

Mr. Glueck: We have this internal mantra that data is a privilege. We turned away millions of dollars in deals that don’t match our ethics guidelines. Our investors have been fully supportive, so we’ve had no pressure to compromise our ethical stance. We’ve talked a lot about the Hippocratic oath for data science: Do no harm.

Foursquare has a little advantage in that even in our consumer origins, we were always dealing with a sensitive set of information. We had to think about a lot of these questions very early on.

WSJ: How have Foursquare’s beginnings as a social media platform informed its transition to a business-to-business platform?

Mr. Glueck: Location technology is incredibly hard, even if you have the latitude and longitude signals from your phone. If you’re on the Lower East Side in a building where you have a nightclub in the basement, a bakery on the first floor, an accounting office on the second and an apartment on third, GPS doesn’t know what floor you’re on. And if you’re trying to make business decisions on bad data, you’re going to make bad decisions.

We’ve spent several hundred million dollars trying to solve this problem by taking a sort of digital fingerprint of every business in the world, thanks to the 14 billion times that consumers have either checked in to our app or to one of our developer partners. If we hadn’t started in the rather roundabout way we began, from consumer to [business-to-business] software enterprise platform, we might not have had to think about all these things.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Foursquare has ditched the check-in and sells data to businesses instead. Do you still use check-in features on social media? How do you share your location online? Join the conversation below.

WSJ: What’s the future of location technology?

Mr. Glueck: We’re really early in how location can make user experiences and business decisions better. We have this vision that, over time, lots of experiences should become more personalized, more relevant. You get tons of spam coming at you, whether you’re surfing the internet or walking down the street. I’d rather have less messaging that’s more personalized.

It's not just about advertising. It could help with health-care intervention, with proper opt-in and privacy protections. There's too much good that can come of it to risk that by not investing in trust and not thinking long-term.

WSJ: What kind of advice do you give to new managers?

Mr. Glueck: When I was at Travelocity, we tried to build this interactive trip planner called Experience Finder. My team—the design and marketing folks—wanted to build it in Flash. The engineering team brought up that Flash wouldn't work in mobile and that no one would be able to search it online.

As a relatively new C-level leader, I thought my job was to just mow down any opposition so my team could do their job. And, of course, the project didn't work, for all the reasons that were pointed out.

Sometimes as a leader, you have to remember that it's your responsibility to steer the company and not operate in silos. It's a tough lesson to learn.

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Corrections & Amplifications

Jeff Glueck said that as a CMO spending a billion dollars, he could understand whether his ads were working or not by using internet cookies [to track customer choices]. An earlier version of this story said Mr. Glueck spent a million dollars.