There’s an app for that

July 12, 2011 By Aundaray Guess

I was sitting with a friend and he told me about this new guy he hooked up with. I’m asking how they met and he states by the phone. No shit Sherlock I mean really how did you meet? Was it on the street, online in a chat room, doing laundry-what? He laughs and tells me again by the phone and proceeds to pull out his IPhone and shows me an app that alerts him to guys within his current walking distance. We’re not talking about four or five guys, we’re talking about pages of men looking for something. I don’t want to assume it was just for sex but if it walks like a duck and talks like a duck...

Basically for those without a smartphone, this app uses your location based on the GPS on most phones and shows you other men who allows their smartphone to use their current location. It has a chat utility to initiate a real time conversation and from there whatever happens, happens.

To be fair it’s not always about sex as some may see it as a form to meet other men for friendship since they themselves don’t frequent clubs or other typical ’gay locations’ and are looking for something other than a booty call. But on the other side it has the opportunity to allow men to connect for sex which brings me to the question of how do current HIV outreach efforts adapt to this new form of meeting? Especially when the current state of outreach for many agencies are not only keeping up with the times but also the technology on how people meet.

Just by the example my friend showed me, he can be waiting for a bus as the mood hits him or maybe if he didn’t get lucky at a club and he’s still got a buzz happening, he doesn’t have to wait until he gets home, but instead can feed his impulsive nature and make an immediate connection right on the spot he stands.

Looking again at HIV outreach there are some agencies doing amazing work, yet like stated before there are those who take the simple way out and do what every other outreach organization does-go to the clubs. Yet by focusing on just the night clubs, there are so many people missing out on the education or ability to be tested based on the fact that not every gay man goes to the club.

Effective HIV outreach means thinking outside the box and making those connections in the most unlikely places. For instance here in NYC there are tons of free outdoor concerts, some in the hardest hit areas of people infected by HIV such as Harlem. You would think with all the people camping out to get a good spot before the before the concert starts that there could be a mobile HIV testing van on the peripheral to offer a way for people to know their status. Yet as far as I know there is none.

Another idea is to look at training a select group of barbers to at least know how to have a dialogue with their customers on getting tested and providing local resources of where they can get tested. It’s a no-brainer that the barbershop is where men go to let their hair down and share the latest gossip (and yes men do gossip) or news that’s happening in the hood.

To me, even when I had hair and went to my regular barbershop, it was a place where I could let down my guard and listen or join in the conversations happening around me. In an ideal world it would be excellent if there was a program where even barbers themselves could be paired with a social service agency to provide in-house testing on certain days.

Even churches can get in the mix and although some churches offer testing at off-hours, imagine if testing was provided right after a service on a Sunday morning.

Maybe that’s what we need, an app for people who want to get tested but don’t feel comfortable going into a clinic or social service agency known for offering services to HIV clients based on the stigma people may carry. Hey maybe we can get an app for removing stigma!

By showing me the new technology of meeting people by his smartphone, I have yet to think of a way to outreach to that new form of connection, yet its one that I hope agencies are looking at. They always say meet them where they’re at and it’s evident that not all men are going to the clubs but if we really want to do a cohesive HIV outreach effort we have to let go of the old ways and move into the new!

And unfortunately there’s no app for that.

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