Why Foursquare refuses to sell user data

On the latest episode of *The Vergecast*, Foursquare CEO Jeff Glueck discusses the ethics of companies that track their users' movements. *The Verge* editor-in-chief Nilay Patel and Glueck talk through Foursquare's goal of helping its customers become less reliant on mapping companies like Google, and how responsibly managing a user's data and privacy is not only the right thing to do, but good for business.

You can listen to their discussion about the case for breaking up Amazon and Facebook in its entirety on *The Vergecast* right now. Below is a lightly edited excerpt from the interview.

Nilay Patel: You collect a lot of data. So do you ever think you're working across incentives? Are you working against your own self interest economically to not sell some of this stuff?

Jeff Glueck: I have turned down, time and again, million-dollar offers to sell data that was against our sense of ethics, and I'd turn it down in a millisecond. People have offered millions of dollars. Nothing is worth violating the trust because this is a business that depends on trust. It's not that people don't approach us. It's just that we say no. One of the things in the *New York Times* article, which we didn't really dig into about location, is that in theory, if you have a consistent identifier and that consistent identifier over specific timestamps goes to lots of different places, you could in theory re-identify that anonymized individual because you know where they work and they live and they were at a certain place.

It's actually hard to do at scale because if you live in an

apartment building and you go to this 100-story building, good luck deciphering who's who. But we think a lot about that. So when we worked with institutional investors who wanted to understand is Chipotle affected by the *E. coli* standard, we blurred the data set so that you can never connect a person across visits. We might say this month there were so many visits at a Chipotle and last month there were so many visits. But you can't see the trails of individuals, so you can't identify the data. That would be an example of putting a lot of thought into how to ensure privacy because what those stock pickers want, they don't care about your personal trail, they want to know are more people going to McDonald's after they announced all-day breakfast than the week before.

So that's, I think, a legitimate market research question and we can help. But we do it in such a way that you can't get the identities and we've been asked for that and we just don't participate in that because we just think there's too much upside to risk this. We're playing for the next 20 years. There's so much opportunity here in ways that can be totally privacy-friendly and user controlled that we're not going to risk that for someone offering us a million dollars for raw location data. We just won't participate in that.

The real danger is that all this innovation that we believe in and contextual awareness, what we call contextual computing, that could all be risked if some creepy company does creepy things and we get really bad legislation instead of smart legislation. So that's not worth it. We'd love to see unethical behavior weeded out of the market because I think that's what the consumers will need to believe in this future. I've never had a board member push us to violate our ethics principles.

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