Online

Facebook faces its future

Robin Raskin, Raising Digital Kids, explains the issues surrounding the phenomenon of social networking internet sites and why Facebook.com is one of the most interesting examples.

SOCIAL NETWORKING – building communities that bring people together on the internet has manifested itself in countless and clever ways, but it’s the youth market that will push the notion of building communities of user-generated content and connections to new levels. For professionals, sites like LinkedIn.com allow people to broaden their contact network by using a ‘who knows who’ approach to facilitate introductions. Meetup.com, made famous during the Howard Dean presidential campaign, helps people with like interests (from politics to Scrabble) find each other in cyberspace and then meet in the physical world. Dating sites like Match.com let those with romantic inclinations cut to the chase and search for a soulmate in ways that transcend geographical boundaries.

But the tidal wave of activity at this moment is happening at MySpace.com and Facebook.com where the youth market (ages 13–22) congregate. Both let registered users create profile pages with detailed information about who they are and what they like to do. With a profile established, they proceed to build a network of friends and friends of friends. To the consternation of their parents and teachers, many of the profile pages include everything from suggestive photos and sexual preferences to explicit details of what they did last weekend.

MySpace.com began life as website to help unknown musicians get their works heard. Today it’s a virtual community with over 38 million members who post profile pages detailing their life in words, music and pictures. MySpace’s great success may ultimately, however, may lead to its demise. As MySpace becomes over-populated, and as its new corporate parent, NewsCorp, tries to increase its revenues, there’s a probability that the fickle youth market will jump to the next hot-spot.

Facebook.com

The most interesting social network in cyberspace today is at Facebook.com. Facebook is one of the first social networks to have been built in exclusivity. The community is closed to anyone who doesn’t have belong to an academic community. (For the college community this means having a .edu email address.) To students who flock to register at the site the ‘school community’ message provides a sense of belonging and safety. Not only can ‘like’ people find each other on Facebook, but only ‘like’ people can join in the first place.

The .edu requirement gives Facebook its unique ambience. On college campuses it has become the electronic replacement for those ageing printed facebooks or viewbooks that many schools dispense (at great expense) as student directories. It has 6 million subscribers, many of whom are daily devotees. Recent estimates say as many as 80–90% of students on campuses where Facebook has been adopted have profile pages and the majority of those check their Facebook daily.
When it started in 2004 Facebook was created for college students. In the autumn of 2005 it launched a separate entry portal for high schools. High-school students are required to register as members of a school, just like on the college pages. Today there are about 2000 colleges and 22,000 high schools registered. Of course, the instant a high-school student is accepted (and accepts) to a college they are given a .edu address. Hence, a built-in rite of passage.

Because it services students, Facebook may provide a false sense of security. Many students believe they can mingle with their peers free from intruders. However, after a few public incidents and copious attention from the press, they are quickly learning that Facebook not only makes no guarantees that people who don’t belong stay out, but that because of it’s popularity it’s become something of a target for a bevy of surprise visitors. Stories abound about how everyone from marketers, to job recruiters, to college admissions counsellors, to teachers and even law enforcement are using Facebook to see what students are doing.

Rules of engagement

On Facebook, your personal profile page is a template where you can voluntarily enter a variety of personal information – everything from birthday, to hobbies, home town, phone number, sexual and political orientation, college major, classes, favourite books and music, and more. While Facebook has privacy features that could limit who sees these profile pages, most students ignore them.

Beneath the Facebook profile pages is a powerful database. Every entry field is searchable. So, for instance, with a click you can find out who on Facebook is in your chemistry class, who shares your birthday, whether that freshman you spotted is engaged in a meaningful relationship, or where your high-school buddies are now.

The rules of engagement for Facebook users are elegantly simple yet there are countless ways to explore these profile pages. Any member can browse the entire Facebook for names and institutional affiliations, but a detailed profile view of another member is exposed only once a person becomes part of your social group. Friends are allowed to join your group by invitation only. Ardent Facebook users will collect friends (reaching out to friends of friends), often measuring their popularity by how big a circle of Facebook friends they can amass.

Return visits

Other features of Facebook are designed keep members constantly running back to check the latest developments. ‘The wall’ is a place on your profile page where others in your network can post comments to you, or about you. It’s the internet equivalent of ‘the bathroom stall’.

Text entry is just a piece of the action. Facebook also allows the user to post a photo gallery of their life. It’s here that weekend parties, sports games and other social scenes are often documented. A relatively new feature lets the user tag the people in their photos by name. They, in turn can search for photos tagged with
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Of course Facebook is not one homogenous group of students. There are tons of subgroups created each day where like-minded individuals can find camaraderie. You’ll find alumnae groups, rugby groups and political activists, and they’ll find each other.

Students are smitten by Facebook in varying degrees, but the majority confess that it’s an important, fairly constant, part of their lives. They’ll check their pages for comments, messages and general happenings. They’ll use it to arrange everything from dates to parties to study sessions. Most say they use it to stay in touch with friends they already know, and nearly all admit they’ve used it to ‘check out’ people before meeting them.

Trouble lurks

Parents and educators have become apoplectic as the press has reported Facebook incidents. Some private high schools have banned the use of school emails on Facebook, threatening expulsion. Law enforcement agents have RAIDed college parties after details were posted on Facebook. Admissions officers, teachers and administrators have made scanning Facebook for mentions of their school or students a part of their day.

The Facebook phenomenon is not lost to marketers either. Marketers, who also have .edu addresses, are already mining the profile pages for significant data. Facebook even calls out the top trends in movies, music and literature in a section called ‘PULSE’. They’ve also begun to use a combination of ads and messages to do everything from extending offers to try new products to getting students to sign up for focus groups. Any marketer worth his paycheck is flocking to Facebook and poring over the pages to get a hold on the psyche of this important demographic.

Despite the infiltration, students seem to be both optimistic and naïve about the exclusivity of Facebook. They’ll post compromising photos and intimate details of their life with little regard for who might be accessing the information. By the same token, adults should take Facebook information with a big grain of salt. A quick read-through of a few profile pages should confirm that there’s a good deal of fantasy, posturing, simple playfulness and outright being outlandish taking place on these pages.

Facebooking the future

Ultimately Facebook may follow Friendster and other early social networks that have become oversaturated, stale and stagnant. Students may move on to the next cyber-bar, somewhere that’s less notorious for attracting parents, teachers and the rest. But the rules of engagement for social networks will be similar. Kids will post detailed information in order to network with others. Teaching kids how to stay safe and protect themselves from revealing too much information on Facebook should be a top priority but, be forewarned, whether it’s Facebook or the next new thing, parents should help make sure that kids understand the implications of finding friends in cyberspace.

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