



# ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING

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## WHAT IS SOCIAL NETWORKING?

Social networking - perhaps you have heard of it before, but are not quite sure what it means.

Social networking is the grouping of individuals into specific groups, like small rural communities or a neighbourhood subdivision, if you will. Although social networking is possible in person, especially in the workplace, universities and high schools, it is most popular online. This is because unlike most high schools, colleges or workplaces, the Internet is overrun with millions of individuals who are looking to meet other people, to gather and share first-hand information and experiences about any number of topics ... from golfing, gardening, developing friendships and professional alliances.

When it comes to online social networking, web sites are commonly used. These web sites are known as social sites. Social networking web sites function like an online community of Internet users. Depending on the web site in question, many of these online community members share common interests in hobbies, religion, or politics. Once you are granted access to a social networking web site you can begin to socialise. This socialisation may include reading the profile pages of other members and possibly even contacting them.

The friends that you can make are just one of the many benefits to online social networking. Another benefit is diversity, because the Internet gives individuals from all around the world access to social

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networking sites. This means that although you are in the United States, you could develop an online friendship with someone in Denmark. Not only will you make new friends, but you just might learn a thing or two about new cultures or new languages - and learning is always a good thing.

As mentioned, social networking often involves grouping specific individuals

or organisations together: While there are a number of social networking web sites that focus on particular interests, others do not. The web sites without a main focus are often referred to as 'traditional' social networking web sites and usually have open memberships. This means that anyone can become a member, no matter what their hobbies, beliefs or views are. However, once you are inside this online community, you can begin to create your own network of friends and eliminate members that do not share common interests or goals.

As I am sure you are aware, there are dangers associated with social networking including data theft and viruses, which are on the rise. The most prevalent danger, though, often involves online predators or individuals who claim to be someone that they are not. Although danger does exist with online networking, it also exists with networking in the real world, too.

As when meeting strangers at clubs and bars, at school or at work - you are also advised to proceed with caution when online. By being aware of your cyber-surroundings and who you are talking to, you should be able to safely enjoy online social networking. It will take many phone conversations to get to know someone, but you really won't be able to make a clear judgement until you meet each other in person. Just use common sense and listen to your inner voice; it will tell you when something does not feel right about the online conversations.

I could have chosen any number of social networking examples, but was requested by our editor and others to focus on two well-known ones.

## FACEBOOK

Joining the community is as easy as logging on to Facebook.com and filling in a simple online form to register. In common with other social networks, Facebook provides users with the opportunity to create their own profile page. This usually includes information such as age, marital status, religious beliefs and other personal details. It also includes the user's network of friends and photograph albums. Communication with friends, family and often, complete strangers, takes place via message 'walls', status updates and an e-mail type message system.



*Facebook is a social network which was founded in 2004, originally for college students. Now catering for all age groups, Facebook is probably the fastest growing Internet community today*



However, increasing numbers of applications such as games, news updates and the opportunity to rank everything from movies to friends have resulted in crowded profile pages which are more and more difficult to access. Facebook is currently looking at redesigning its format.

#### *Issues of privacy*

One of the problems with a social networking site is that we are inclined to reveal far more of ourselves online than we would in our day to day lives and Facebook is no exception.

Although Facebook does provide users with privacy settings to reduce accessibility to their profiles, most neglect to do so. In fact, a number of Facebook users I spoke to were unaware of this function. Privacy settings which allow users to limit the viewers from viewing their personal information should be clearly available and easy to manage.

Revealing photographs, unguarded reminiscences with friends, postings describing last night's party which might have got somewhat out of hand, all go towards building up a persona that your friends might enjoy but a potential employer might find a little disturbing, to say the least. And recruiters are increasingly using social networks such as Facebook to find out more about job applicants. By going into the profile of a prospective employee, employers are able to do background checks and access sensitive information about the job seeker's character and interests which they would legally be prevented from enquiring about during a formal interview. Although this is not endorsed by Facebook there is nothing to prevent anyone with an account with them to search other users' profiles.

Another privacy issue which Facebook was embroiled in recently is the tendency of social web sites to share personal information without the users' consent. Facebook crossed this line with the introduction of its Beacon service which notified all the users' friends about online purchases made by the user.

#### *Opportunities for entrepreneurs*

Of course, privacy is not an issue for entrepreneurs whose aim in joining Facebook is to disseminate as much information to as wide an audience as possible. As an entrepreneur you can open a business Facebook page as easily as you can set up a personal profile.

This allows you a more flexible layout to create a customised profile which will introduce your product or service to a virtually unlimited audience. Through Facebook you are able to add photographs or videos of your product, include reviews and send updates or news of special offers to your Facebook friends/fans.

In return you will get feedback from your fans who will often share their views with their own friends, quickly building up a network of potential clients for your business.

#### *Bottom of form*

Facebook originally distinguished itself from other networks by cutting down on the cluttered web pages and spam prevalent in its rivals. This was done chiefly by limiting the users' ability to change their profile pages and keeping the design format simple and basic.

## TWITTER

Twitter is a real-time information network powered by people all around the world that lets you share and discover what's happening now.

Twitter asks 'what's happening' and makes the answer spread across the globe to millions, immediately.

#### *What Twitter does*

Whether it's breaking news, a local traffic jam, a deal at your favourite shop or a funny pick-me-up from a friend, Twitter keeps you informed with what matters most to you today and helps you discover what might matter most to you tomorrow.

The timely bits of information that spread through Twitter can help you make better choices and decisions and, should you so desire, create a platform for you to influence what's being talked about around the world. Search results spread across Twitter and in other ways across the web so you can discover what's happening on and off Twitter.com wherever you prefer.

Twitter can give a voice to even the weakest signals because of its simplicity. Users can access Twitter on powerful broadband connections via a video game console or through faint connections in rural areas via SMS on a simple mobile phone. You can also access Twitter through more than 50,000 third-party Internet and mobile applications.

Just remember, how you use Twitter is completely up to you. Follow hundreds of people. Follow a dozen. Post every hour. Post never. Search for your favourite topics and create lists. Or not. You are in control on Twitter.

#### *Twitter for businesses*

Twitter is a simple tool that helps connect businesses more meaningfully with the right audience at the right time.

Businesses and organisations of all shapes and sizes are now able to stay connected to their customers. It can be used to quickly share information with people interested in your company, gather real-time market intelligence and feedback, and build relationships with customers, partners and other people who care about your business. Customers can use Twitter to tell a company (or anyone else) that they have had a great - or disappointing - experience with your business, offer product ideas, and learn about great offers they have selected.

For real world tips and case studies from businesses that have effectively used Twitter to build their brand and connect more personally with their customers.

#### *Where is Twitter?*

Twitter is based in San Francisco, but it is used by folks in nearly every country in the world. So they are working quickly to add as many additional language options as they can.

Twitter comes in French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish thanks to the help of translators around the world. Users can change their language preference in their settings.

Twitter is also forging deals with the biggest telecom operators in the world to allow users to send and receive Twitter messages over SMS and MMS at no additional cost.





### *Should you choose only one?*

The phenomenon of social networking is still in its infancy and it remains to be seen exactly which network might become the 800-pound gorilla in the space. It is reminiscent of the dotcom 90s, when dozens of venture-backed search firms battled for dominance and search appeared to become a commodity, with limited monetisation potential, (or so we all thought at the time).

There are now so many social networks vying for users that even the most elite 'Digerati' have trouble keeping up with the ever-shifting landscape. And most are still struggling to find effective monetisation strategies, casting doubt on their long term survival and pointing to massive consolidation at some point.

### *The evolution of social networking compared to search*

In the now-infamous dotcom era, Yahoo, Lycos, Excite and others evolved into portals in an attempt to find ways to make money, since nobody had really found effective ways to monetise searches. That was, until companies like Goto.com (which became Overture and was eventually bought by Yahoo) and Google invented the concept of paid search and contextual, pay-to-click advertising models. The rest is history and we all know who won the war.

So it seems today that applications like Twitter and Facebook, while attracting new users at astounding rates, have not fully defined their business models and the 800-pound gorilla has yet to emerge. It is still early in the game and, as with searches in the mid-90s, the eventual winners in the social networking space may not even yet exist, but I would argue that Twitter and Facebook are emerging as potential contenders to dominate.

The differences between the two networks are substantial and in some ways a direct comparison between the two is actually difficult to make. Twitter is simple and feels like Google in 1998, while Facebook offers a portal-like interface somewhat reminiscent of Yahoo.

### *Key elements of Facebook and Twitter*

Facebook appeals to people looking to reconnect with old friends and family members or find new friends online: the mashup of features like e-mail, instant messaging, image and video sharing, et cetera, feels familiar; while Twitter is a bit harder to get your mind around at first.

Most people can very quickly grasp how to use Facebook to connect to friends and family, using it to share thoughts, images, et cetera. Like MySpace but more geared to adults than teens, Facebook is a social networking portal; beckoning you not to leave but rather to stick around and communicate within the network.

Twitter; on the other hand,

encourages you to grab ideas in byte-size chunks and use your updates as jumping off points to other places or just let others know what you're up to at any given moment.

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### *Different communication styles for different social settings*

Let's say you go to a wedding or any other social gathering where lots of people know each other. The style and tone of communication there will be more like using Facebook; you chat with old friends and acquaintances, mixing and mingling in an intimate manner. In this setting, people tend to feel more relaxed and 'in their element'. Conversations are familiar and centre on shared experiences and connections.

Now, when you go to a large party or social event where you don't know most of the people in attendance, you will use a very different style of communication, more like Twitter. You want to meet people and somehow make yourself known, stand out from the crowd, make an impression, self-promote and make new connections. Twitter is like getting onto the podium, and not everyone feels comfortable or knows how to stand comfortably in the spotlight.

In fact, almost all of us, when first approaching Twitter, tend to use it to post useless updates like 'Going to lunch', thinking of it as another tool to communicate with friends, when in fact, it is more like stepping on to a stage, where you are communicating with an audience and find that you need to find a voice fast and say something useful and interesting or lose the attention of your audience. People refer to Twitter as a mini or micro blogging platform.

### *So which social network is the best?*

While zealots will immediately point to either Twitter or Facebook as being superior; the truth is that each has its advantages and disadvantages and will tend to appeal more to different types of people and for different reasons. Each can have great or little value to anyone; it really depends on what you are trying to accomplish in a given situation.

### *The future of social networking*

In the end, both Twitter and Facebook are simply communication tools; both will continue to evolve and morph as users find new ways to extract value and either network may or may become a long term winner in the rapidly evolving social networking space. Ultimately, the fact remains to be seen whether either application has a profitable, scalable and sustainable business model or whether the exit strategy is simply to be acquired.

As we learned in the search space, consolidation will eventually prevail. Unless they can find a way to turn all those eyeballs into profits, social networks will lose relevance. It does seem obvious that the venture capitalists are betting they will not only continue to enjoy tremendous growth but will also successfully monetise all that traffic.

But, will either Twitter or Facebook become the next Google or will they fade into the rear view mirror of technological and social evolution? What do you think?

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*Twitter keeps you informed with what matters most to you today and helps you discover what might matter most to you tomorrow*

