



“Facebook is a great way to find real people talking about popular subjects”



By Joe Leary

When a Harvard University student named Mark Zuckerberg launched the social networking site then known as “The Facebook” back in 2004, the site’s membership was limited to his fellow Harvard students. Within weeks word of the site spread, interest in it grew, and the site’s network quickly expanded to include students from several other Ivy League institutions.

As the months and years passed, the number of Facebook users soared and its network expanded beyond colleges and universities. Today, Facebook has not only transcended its original parameters, it is one of the world’s pre-eminent social networking websites and a key driver of the online zeitgeist.

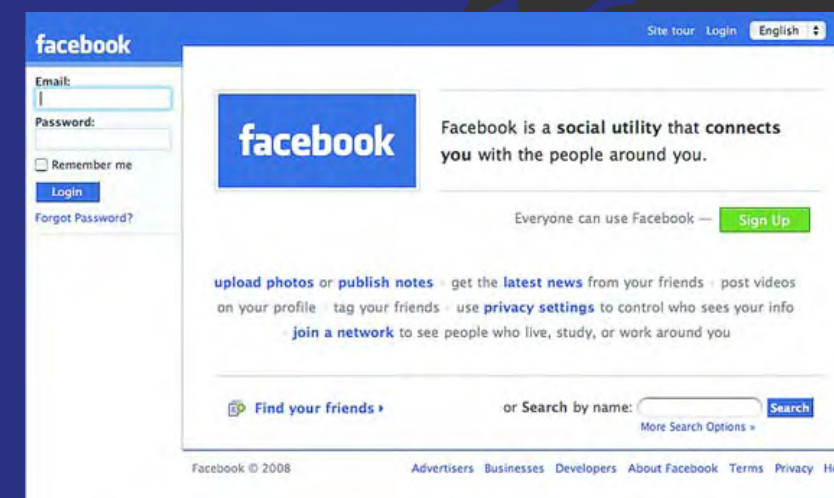
In just over three years—and in an arena where new players rise, grow and fall with equal rapidity—Facebook has surpassed even the wildest expectations of its founder, among others. Facebook currently has over 59 million active users worldwide and is growing daily. Just over a year ago the site was ranked the 60th most popular Web site in the United States; this year, it’s ranked seventh.

When it comes to reach, the country most saturated with Facebook users is Canada (over 22% of our population are members) followed by Norway and the UK. In the US, Facebook is now the number one Web site for photo uploads, with over 60 million uploaded each week. With new users averaging roughly 250,000 per day, and the site earning 65 billion page views per month, the success of Facebook (and the ensuing social phenomenon it has created) is staggering. Even its name has entered the everyday lexicon as a verb—how often have you (or someone you know) had to “go Facebook,” or spent the morning “Facebooking”?

And if you are a Facebook user, research shows you’re spending approximately 19 minutes every day using it to connect or reconnect with others, to market yourself, your activities or your interests, or to simply communicate with others through a myriad of user-developed Facebook tools. Whether you’re seeking to reacquaint yourself with childhood and school friends, find a long-lost love or family members or reach out to someone new, Facebook has established itself as the place on the Web where you’re most likely to do it.

If you’re not already using Facebook, here’s how it works. Originally created as an online version of a university “facebook” (a directory of students and faculty, featuring pictures and mini-biographies, distributed internally throughout most US colleges every year), Facebook is free to join (its revenues come from advertising, which are said to roll in at the rate of \$2 million USD per week).

You then use a simple interface to create an online profile containing as much (or as little) personal information as they’d like, including photos, personal preferences, hobbies and interests. You then begin connecting with





others, who then become part of part of your circle of Facebook “friends.” Facebook’s messaging, status update and other information-feeding features make it easy—easier than email, and with much less formality—to send and receive information about your friends (and for them to receive information about you).

As the network of Facebook users has grown, the site’s usefulness has also grown. As a member of the Global National’s television health correspondent Jennifer Tryon is quick to sing the site’s praise; for her, Facebook is a vital work tool.

“Facebook is a great way to find real people talking about popular subjects,” enthuses Tryon. “As a health journalist, it’s often hard for me to find patients willing to talk about their conditions. Facebook, on the other hand, is full of groups dedicated to particular health issues. People seem to be more comfortable posting and otherwise speaking out on Facebook; they’re also more accessible, which is great for a journalist like me, always working on a tight deadline.”

Josh Abel, on the other hand, is the lead singer and keyboardist for the emerging rock band The Sessions; he feels his and the band’s presence on Facebook has helped them draw bigger audiences. While Facebook’s social-networking competitor MySpace has been widely hailed as the site for showcasing and marketing recording artists, more and more musicians seem to be turning to Facebook as well. For Abel, it’s all about increasing the band’s accessibility to as many fans as possible.

“You could have a pile of gold that you want to give away, but if you leave it under a blanket and don’t tell anyone about it, it will be a while before anyone discovers what you’ve got for them,” says Abel. “It’s the same scenario with good music; that’s why Web sites like Facebook and MySpace are so great for artists. They allow us to maintain a presence in our fans’ lives, so we can chat with them and keep them in the know about our upcoming shows. They make us accessible and in turn, make our fans accessible to us.”

“Employers are also increasingly using Facebook to track their employee’s personal histories and habits”

Vancouver morning show radio personality Kid Carson of The Beat 94.5 FM credits the site for part of his show’s ratings growth. “I felt the need to go to the listener and earn them one at a time,” he says. “Facebook literally intertwines my social circle with my audience. I feel like everyone there is a friend.”

Facebook is also playing a significant role as a campaign tool in this year’s in this year’s US Presidential race. The site gives the candidates have the ability to get their message to the masses—and lets the masses communicate directly with them—by allowing them to build vast networks of friends and colleagues.

But for every story with an upside you’re likely to find a downside, and Facebook is no exception. The site has drawn serious criticism for several clauses within its privacy policy, one of which reserves the right to sell users’ data—including personal information and all uploaded photos, videos and other information—to private companies; another of which allows Facebook to “use information about you that we collect from other sources, including but not limited to newspapers and Internet sources such as blogs, instant messaging services and other users of Facebook, to supplement your profile.”

As frequently as users are unaware of Facebook’s own privacy agreement, they are just as often unaware of how to use their profile’s privacy settings, or are less than cautious when revealing personal information to friends online—all of which can make them vulnerable to data miners and identity thieves.

Employers are also increasingly using Facebook to track their employee’s personal histories and habits; universities and high schools are using the site to investigate underage drinking and other on-campus infractions; and law enforcement departments are using Facebook and other social networking sites to apprehend criminals only too willing to share their exploits online.

But for every gang member busted through his online profile, there will always be those who want to subvert the conversion of Facebook into a useful tool for “Big Brother” and instead use the site to tweak authority. Take the George Washington University students who recently posted news of a “cake party”; when school administrators, fearing “cake” was a metaphor for some kind of illicit activity, called the police to raid the party, all the police officers found were students... and cake.

All of which serves to remind us that in the case of Facebook, it’s easy for the lines between the personal and the public can easily become blurred. While we may think that we’re only sharing our personal information with those of our choosing, there are any number of ways, when it comes to Facebook, that our information can leak into—or be grabbed by—the hands of others. That said, Facebook has in only a few short years reinvented and transformed how we communicate with one another. Let’s see if we’re all still “friends” with Facebook five years from now.

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