

FEATURE

Facebook 101: Ten Things You Need to Know About Facebook

by Thomas Krivak

When Mark Zuckerberg was 19 and a student at Harvard University, he wanted to find a way for his fellow Harvard colleagues to connect with each other. So in February 2004, Zuckerberg introduced Facebook (www.facebook.com) and a new era of networking began.

Today, the social networking site has more than 60 million active members, roughly the same population as the U.K. These users can now upload photos, have group discussions, and even play games on their individual profiles; they can also add one another as “friends” and connect with users who share similar interests, regardless of where they are in the world. Nowadays, more businesses and corporate folks are joining Facebook too, adding their pages to the Facebook network. Advertisers are even turning their attention to this growing market for good reason—there is strength in numbers. So what should you know about Facebook? Here are 10 things for starters.

1. Who Is Using Facebook?

Since its inception in February 2004, Facebook has grown significantly, and it now has more than 60 million active users. In comparison, MySpace has a total of 300 million users, although not all are active (“active” users are those who have logged in within the last 30 days). According to Facebook’s statistics page, the number of active users has doubled every 6 months, with 250,000 new users joining each day since January 2007 for an average of 3% growth per week. According to internet-ranking company comScore, Facebook is the sixth-most trafficked site in the U.S., with the average user spending 20 minutes a day actively using Facebook by uploading photos, sending messages, or even having discussions within a group. The highly coveted demographic (from 18 to 25 years old) is 52% of Facebook’s userbase, averaging 30 to 45 minutes each day on the site.

2. What Can You Find on Facebook?

Simply put, if people have an interest, it is part of Facebook. A user just has to enter a topic, such as “video games” or “new technology,” into the search box and then hit the “search” button. Up to 1,000 profiles are displayed, 20 at a time, starting with people in the user’s network. If a user who belongs to the University of North Carolina (UNC) network is searching for basketball fans, the results returned would be people in the UNC network first, followed by those in other networks.

From that point, a user can contact others by clicking “send message” or, if that user has a group, by clicking on the “invite to group” button. The user will see an increased number of members joining and participating in the group’s message board discussions.

Facebook also has a “poke” feature, which, in most circles, is regarded as a form of online flirtation, comparable to match.com’s “winks.” When one user is poked by another, a notification appears on the user’s homepage, allowing him or her to either “poke back” the other user or “hide poke,” which makes the poke disappear.

3. Why Are People Using Facebook?

For one thing, it’s an easy icebreaker. Imagine an incoming freshman at a large university who is into electronic gaming, specifically *Halo*, a popular first-person-shooter game for the Xbox. In an attempt to find people who like the same game, the student logs into Facebook and enters “Halo” in the search box. Facebook then returns up to 1,000 users at the freshman’s university who have *Halo* listed in their interests sections. He can send messages to the people whose profiles came up during the search and set up a giant *Halo* game from his computer on move-in day. The freshman has found his niche, and he can concentrate on seeing who his competition is for the *Halo* crown as well.

Certain people join Facebook just to have their own place to upload photos so they can share them with friends and family. Other users, like Colin McEvoy, an avid movie buff, log in to check on user-submitted movie reviews. “I have friends like me who are real movie geeks,” McEvoy says. “I can check what they have to say about a film. It’s quicker than reading a full-blown movie review. You can compile your own ratings so you can compare and contrast them with others. I like it because I can see if there are any films I might like that I haven’t watched yet.”

4. What Kinds of Third-Party Programs Can You Add?

According to the Facebook Developers website (<http://developers.facebook.com>), the software development kit (SDK) allows users to create programs and post them on Facebook. Developers can create “applications that deeply integrate into a user’s Facebook experience.” In technical terms, “the Facebook API uses a REST-based interface. This means that our Facebook method calls are made over the internet by sending HTTP GET or POST requests to our REST server. With the API, you can add social context to your application by utilizing profile, friend, photo, and event data.”

From Java-based Tetris Clones to the Flixster-based “Movies” application that enables users to look at movies and share their reviews with others, there’s a long list of application titles to choose from (there are more than 10,000 applications, with 100 more being added each day), and there’s no limit to the amount of third-party programs a user can add.

“I chose the apps that correlate with my own hobbies,” says McEvoy. “It’s like there’s a bunch of vampire and zombie apps that I get asked to add each time I login, but I’m into movies, I’m into books, so I can pick and choose the ones I want and ignore the ones I don’t.”

McEvoy echoes the sentiment of most of the Facebook community, noting that although there’s a large collection of applications to add to a user’s profile, only certain applications will pique an individual’s interest enough to add it to his or her profile.

5. What Are Advertisers Doing There?

Joseph Caviston, founder of Burnt Carbon Productions (a music label that signs local up-and-coming bands in the northeast Pennsylvania area), says that using Facebook to advertise is invaluable. “As a promo tool, it’s great,” Caviston says. “Say a band’s going to a venue they’ve never played at before. Using Facebook, I can just type in the name of a band that’s similar to the one I’m promoting and get a larger base to send materials to.”

Although Burnt Carbon Productions also has a MySpace page, Caviston prefers Facebook. “I like Facebook for promoting more than MySpace,” he says. “It’s a lot more user-friendly; I can target my exact audience in colleges and towns near where my bands are playing.”

“Before the bands I have signed [up] go on tour, I take out an ad in each of the cities they’re visiting, and it helps out quite a bit [with audience turnout],” he says. “You can’t touch it because you can target the exact audience you need.”

6. Who Else Is Joining the Facebook Network?

More than half of Facebook users are no longer in college, while users 25 and older are now the fastest growing demographic for the social networking site. Although most of the users in this age group have graduated from college, they are still active on the site. East Stroudsburg University senior Matt Haley, founder of Pandemic Hosting, a web-hosting startup, says that he’s targeting the 25-and-older crowd when he buys ads on Facebook. “Facebook targets tech-savvy people,” he says. “I know that some of the people in my target will be looking to create their own website for one reason or another. Some want to open a business, while others just want a site for their resume.”

By tapping into this demographic, Haley says he wants to get his name tossed into the web-hosting fray, adding that although Pandemic Hosting is a small enterprise, “all it takes is impressing a few people, and it’ll expand from there.”

Graduates also use Facebook to keep in touch, often using the Groups tool to invite former roommates and friends to upcoming events, such as engagement parties and baby showers.

With the 2008 presidential elections on the horizon, many political figures, most notably Barack Obama, Rudy Giuliani, and Ron Paul, have set up Facebook pages to spark more interest in their bids for the White House.

[At press time, Rudy Giuliani had dropped out of the race. —Ed.]

Upon adding a candidate to the “politicians you support” section on a personal page, a user can now enter into discussions on the politician’s message board where candidates often write and spark conversations with their supporters on a variety of issues from healthcare reform to ending the war in Iraq.

7. What Groups Are Now on Facebook?

There are countless groups on Facebook, which run the gamut from political groups (Newsvine’s Election ’08) to current events (Americans for Alternative Energy) to self-proclaimed pointless groups (The Largest Facebook Group Ever).

Within the groups, users are free to post photos and write on the group’s “wall,” (a type of forum) to speak with others who share their interests. Political groups and “just-for-fun” groups are not the only options, however. There are a number of Facebook groups for professional organizations, such as the Library 2.0 Interest Group, while Media 2.0 and the American Library Association (ALA) also have groups.

8. Why Is Facebook So Popular for Sharing Photos?

Uploading photos is a cinch thanks to Facebook’s easy-to-use interface. The browser-based program shows a grid of thumbnail-sized pictures

while the user clicks a checkbox on the photos he or she wants to upload.

According to comScore, Facebook is the No. 1 photo sharing application on the web, with more than 14 million photos uploaded daily. In comparison, Flickr, the No. 2 photo sharing application, averages 3 million to 5 million uploads a day.

9. How Do You Find Old Friends and New Colleagues?

By using Facebook's search feature, a user just needs to type someone's name and four options (send message, poke, view friends, and add to friends) will appear next to a small thumbnail picture of the person.

If the person shares a network with the user and allows nonfriends to see his or her profile (see the section on privacy settings below), a user can click on the thumbnail picture, which brings up relevant data about the person, such as education information, musical tastes, and favorite TV shows, among others.

A user can also search for people from any network simply by typing a portion of the network's name in the search field then clicking on the relevant network, which works well if an old acquaintance has a common name.

10. What About Privacy?

Facebook allows users to control their thumbnail views, which is shown when another user searches based on name or keyword. Everyone can use Facebook's privacy settings to control who can see his or her full profile. If a user is in a network and another person's profile is public, he or she can click on the thumbnail picture to view the profile. Likewise, if the profile options are set to private, the user must be "friends" with the second party to view the profile. There is also an option to show only a limited profile, which is user-defined by the privacy settings.

Setting up a Facebook page is easy. All a potential user needs is an email address. If the address is tied to a college, the user will be entered into his or her college's network. For example, East Stroudsburg University (ESU) students will be placed in the ESU network based on the @esu.edu suffix.

If the address is not tied to a network, the user must decide which network to join after reviewing a short selection process. Filling in personal and educational data is not required, but it will give the page a better feel, especially since the user can click on his or her listed interests to view other users' profiles that have the same interests listed on their homepages.

Once those steps are completed, new users can join groups, read and post in discussion forums, and add third-party programs to their sites.

Mark Logic, Inc. recently joined Facebook with its Kick It application, according to Dave Kellogg, president and CEO. "We launched it because we saw an opportunity to build a nice, simple example of the power of XQuery and XML search," he says. But the app was created quite by accident (who said "Necessity is the mother of invention"?) by David Amusin, a new staffer at Mark Logic and a recent engineering graduate from the University of California-Berkeley. Amusin had an extra ticket to see the Dave Matthews Band and wanted to find a friend to invite to the concert. Facebook's existing search wasn't very helpful in searching for friends by interest category, so Amusin built the Kick It (aka "hang out") app with the Facebook API. The result was a new way to help find people to "kick it" with and learn more about their friends.

Kellogg reports that bloggers who have found the "neat little app" have responded quite positively to it. But the company isn't making a big push to drive traffic and doesn't plan on making money on it. "In the midterm, I think more and more publishers are going to want to link with the social graph and associated information in building their products," says Kellogg. "They will want to use content platforms that show demonstrable Facebook integration and to work with suppliers who understand how to leverage the Facebook API."

Facebook at a Glance

The sixth-most trafficked site in the U.S. (according to comScore) has the following:

- More than 64 million active users
- An average of 250,000 new users registered each day
- More than 55,000 regional, work-related, collegiate, and high school networks
- More than 14 million photos uploaded daily

- More than 65 billion page views per month
- More than half of users are outside college
- The fastest growing demographic of 25 and older

The U.S. has the most users, followed by the U.K. with more than 8 million active users, and then Canada with more than 7 million active users.

* Statistics from www.facebook.com in mid-February.

*Thomas Krivak is a freelance writer based in Scranton, Penn. His email address is tkrivak@gmail.com.
Send your comments about this article to itletters@infoday.com.*