

## **The Big Four of Social Networking**

**“Will Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and LinkedIn stand the test of time?”**

*by Pete Choppin*

It's OK to be sick and tired of social networking. It may be the most overhyped technology we've seen since the CB radio. Social networking hasn't gone beyond much more than an info-plaything used primarily by teens and tweens.

And yet the major social networks still cannot be ignored. Obviously, their impact on the Internet and with communication and networking has changed the face of the Internet. The big four of social networking, which include Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and LinkedIn, have exploded in popularity, but are they all still on the rise? Who is really using these networks, and are they still being used as intended? Let's take a look.

### **Facebook's Fire Cools**

No one can dispute Facebook's impact on the world. It is *big*, and with millions of posts and interactions each day, the influence of its users is the envy of every marketing professional. Traditional media professionals and other old people will be tempted to look at popularity trends and data and claim that the social media "fad" is over and on the decline, and they would be mistaken.

Facebook data.

Although Facebook's growth may not continue indefinitely, its amazing growth in users from 2008 to the start of 2010 was being fueled by a viral exploration of a new media that allowed people to connect in a way they never had before.

You might be surprised in the drop of 10 million users during July of 2010. However, this is only significant in that it shows a leveling off of growth. The average time on the site is more than 23 minutes, which is much longer than the other three major U.S. social media tools (MySpace, 14:40 minutes; Twitter, 13:10 minutes; LinkedIn, 9:50 minutes). This is important, as more time spent means more interaction and more influence by users and advertisers. Now that the new car smell has worn off, I believe we are seeing the coming of age of a new social media. We'll get to that later.

### **Twitter Continues to Pause**

By and large, Twitter is a misunderstood site. I admit that when I first took a look at it, I was confused. What do you do with it? The main misconception when first encountering Twitter is that visitors think of it as a two-way network. Twitter revolves around the principle of followers. When you choose to follow another Twitter user, that user's tweets appear in reverse chronological order on your main Twitter page. If you follow 20 people, you'll see a mix of tweets scrolling down the page. But its concept is not a conversational network. It is more comparable to message boards where you post your musings of the day that other people browse through.

Twitter data.

Twitter's daily visits have leveled off in the last six months, and some might see this as an ominous sign for the hyper-fast social media tool. Twitter's lack of significant growth in the number of users is due, in part, to a continued lack of understanding of the value of the tweet. The impact of Twitter is not in the posts, but the conversations and the URL links to other blogs and Web pages. Twitter is like headline news for new ideas and concepts. Often posts reveal a new approach or cutting-edge information that won't be in the traditional public arena for months.

### **MySpace Back from the Brink?**

It's no surprise, at least to me, that MySpace has continued dropping users. I have predicted the end of MySpace for some time, but in January 2010 it did something bizarre ... it gained users. The reason? Well, no other major social media tool lets you search by gender, and age, and height, and race, and body type, and sexual orientation—are you getting the picture? MySpace is a social dating site as much as anything else, and lonely people make up a lot of our world's population. So maybe MySpace has found its niche as a romance network and that will stop the freefall of the past two quarters.

MySpace data.

One of the problems with MySpace is its trashy reputation with younger users and the [predators](#) that have frequented the sites. MySpace has taken measures to combat this by limiting the "find-a-friend" search function to give the results of people age 18 and over. That is a smart move to protect minors; however, some teenagers have simply listed themselves as 18 or older to circumvent the limitation. Unfortunately, this has led to much of the deteriorating reputation and drop in users for MySpace.

### **LinkedIn Drifting in Niche**

The latest statistics show that despite millions of people looking for work, the business person-to-business person Web site LinkedIn is not growing.

LinkedIn data.

Like MySpace, LinkedIn has found its niche. Essentially, LinkedIn is a business-oriented Web site that provides a job-exchange service. Most users are using the networking Web site as their digital résumé in order to attract job offers. In the Tom Peters "Re-Imagine" business world where branding is a key element of survival, LinkedIn is a Mecca for self-promotion.

Unfortunately, LinkedIn is not as successful as Facebook and Twitter in two-way interaction. Both of those social media tools do not have as much as of an agenda by individual users as

LinkedIn. Users of the business-oriented network seem to spend more time professing what they know and don't spend as much time listening to others. This is the traditional media model of one-way communication, which is the style of communication that social media has displaced. For some, the self-promotion run-a-muck style of some LinkedIn users is a turn-off that may hurt the site in the long run.

## **Future Predictions**

I believe we are seeing a refinement of each of the big four social media tools. Facebook has become the social sharing network; Twitter is the thought-provoking, learning network; MySpace is the social relationship network; and LinkedIn is the branding and résumé network. Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn will likely end 2010 about where they are now unless something viral either causes a rush of new users, or sends people running away. Twitter still has potential significant growth, but I don't see that happening anytime soon.

Social networking is still a fairly new phenomenon among teens, businesses and professionals; however, now that there seems to be a calming of the major networks, the value and purpose is becoming clearer. That will allow the big four to lock in their market—but it will also open the door for other networks to identify areas of opportunity and weakness.

In 2011 we should see more defined purposes of social media. Much of this will be user driven. Business will certainly want to capitalize on the growing popularity of social media, and we should see more clever marketing to take advantage of the growth.