



Utilize the Power of Social Networking



Social networking sites like Facebook and Flickr are big players in the so-called “Web 2.0” world. What is it that makes these social sites work, and how can you use the same model to enhance your own web sites?

The web sites of the “Web 1.0” era treated their users as passive consumers of content. Users were expected to surf to a website, browse for items of interest, and then move on. The key to attracting readers was to provide them with useful or interesting content. If users were asked to provide input, it was usually just to collect some data or enter parameters for a search or other query.

Over time, web sites became more proactive about soliciting the input of their readers. Typically they were invited to comment on stories that were featured by the host web site. With an informed readership, these comments sometimes contained as much or more useful information than the main story. The comment sections of some sites blossomed into full-blown forums that eclipsed the original content. These “Web 1.5” sites paved the way for Web 2.0 by showing us that community-contributed content could carry real value even compared to official content that was endorsed by the site editors.

Web 2.0 brought it all together, by demoting the idea of “official” content altogether. Web 2.0 sites are predominantly user-powered, and casual visitors to the sites come to see content that was contributed by other readers, not by the site owners. For example:

- **Flickr, YouTube** - share user-contributed digital media
- **Blogspot, Blogger** - share journals and opinions
- **Digg, Reddit, Delicious** - share cool web sites and links

Social Networking for Business

Can social networks make money? If they are large enough or demographically focused, then you may be able to generate some online advertising revenue. But if you are in the business of selling a product or service, then you probably don’t want to start a new business running a social network to generate advertising revenue. In that case, consider some of the ways in which you can utilize the power of social networks to augment your existing sales channels.

blogs: Do you regularly have announcements, stories, or ideas that are of interest to your customers? Consider blogging about them as a way of engaging your customers in your business plans.

user groups: Do users of your products or services have their own stories, ideas, or creations to share and talk about? A “user group” is a great way to bring these people together, and it allows you to get a better idea of what they are doing.

customer galleries: Many businesses display galleries of their products in use. If customers are proud of their use of your product, why not get them to contribute their own photos, and inspire each other directly?

online support forums: Do you deal with lots of support questions? An online forum is another support channel you can offer, with the added benefit that it can archive past support requests and make them searchable.



- *MySpace, Facebook* - build social networks for sharing
- *Twitter* - micro-blogging

Why do these sites work?

1. Given enough participants, the odds are good that someone is going to have something interesting to share.
2. Given enough readers vetting the content, the best contributions are quickly recognized. If there is some way of tracking the most popular content, the cream inevitably rises to the top.
3. The web site owners recognize that their job is to enable and empower users to interact with each other, not to force them to do things in specific ways or consume only what the editors feed them.

Junk

Merely making a system that allows anyone to express themselves is not a panacea, however. The world is full of spammers (who will use any free venue to advertise their goods), scammers (who will use any free venue to try to defraud their victims), trolls (who intentionally behave in an insulting manner because the heated reactions amuse them), idiots (who require no explanation), the innocent and foolish (who enable all of the above), and finally lots of people who simply having nothing interesting to contribute, but insist on contributing anyway. Even in a well-informed and well-meaning community, tempers may occasionally flare, or a small group of people can wander off-topic and alienate other readers.

This means that any system that tries to utilize the power of the crowd to enliven their web site may find themselves dealing with a lot of junk. Think of it this way: if you want to operate a public amusement park, be prepared to budget for a lot of clean-up crews, or pretty soon you'll drown in trash and everyone will stop visiting.

Well-designed social networking systems try to automate much of the clean-up by rating content. This can be done two ways:

1. track how often items are viewed or shared
2. solicit actual ratings (good/bad) from viewers

With this information, you can quickly identify "hot" content and promote it further. Bad content either sinks to the bottom where it gets forgotten, or is flagged for review, clean-up, or deletion.

Volume

Social Networking relies on the "network effect" to generate interest. This is when enough users pile on that there is always something new and interesting happening somewhere. If it takes too long for interesting user-contributed content to appear, the social network will appear "dead" to viewers, and they will wander off.

However, once you have new content appearing quickly, the sheer volume can be overwhelming. When popular items appear, they can draw thousands of viewers, which will tax your bandwidth. And for every gem there can be hundreds of items of junk being posted as well, which can tax your storage. It is important to gauge the amount of activity to expect in your

social networking environment, to ensure your web site and server have the necessary capacity.

Control

Many site owners want to maintain control over what happens on their website "premises". They are concerned about what sorts of sketchy or even illegal things people might do there.

To mitigate this fear, it is common for site owners to want to exercise some executive control over content that appears. For example: forcing all new postings to be reviewed by the webmaster before it gets taken live.

There is a risk to exercising too much control, however. If users cannot see the results of their contribution immediately, the apparent power of the social network is perceptibly diminished. They know that there is a censor looking over their shoulder, and are less likely to contribute freely as a result.

Moderation also adds friction to the social network, slowing it down. Moderation creates a significant delay between when content is created and when it goes public. This carries the risk of stopping dialogues if participants leave due to boredom, or get distracted in the meantime by other happenings online.

Successful social networks deal with these issues in a number of ways.

1. Use post-moderation, rather than pre-moderation. Pre-moderation is when you review content before it goes live. This lets you filter junk well, but slows down the dialogue and gives the impression of censorship. Post-moderation takes content live immediately, but allows readers or editors to moderate it (either promote or demote) after the fact. Junk does get through, but it gets cleaned up as a matter of course, and does not become a serious problem.
2. Provide a useful, working system by which readers can flag something as inappropriate, and bring it to the attention of the webmaster ASAP.
3. Add tools to reduce or eliminate "bots" - automated posting agents that usually just post junk. One common example is captchas - word puzzles you have to solve to submit forms.
4. Reward quality contributors with higher status, increased privileges, or other badges of success.
5. Employ some content scanning techniques to identify problematic words, topics, or shapes that indicate a likelihood of being a junk posting.

Lastly, always include suitable terms of use, disclaimers, copyright, and licensing policies, to ensure that users understand what is appropriate, that you have ample reason to delete problem accounts, and that you are disavowing responsibility for what some sketchy individuals might choose to do with the service you provide.



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