

Social Networking Sites and Libraries

By Richard W. Boss

A “social network” is generally defined as a social structure made up of individuals and/or organizations that are connected by friendship, kinship, financial exchange, sexual relationships, or relationships of beliefs, knowledge or prestige. While the term did not come into general use until the 1950’s, the concept of a social network has been discussed in scholarly literature for almost two centuries. Before the advent of the Web, social networks tended to be limited to scores of people who knew one another. That changed when social networking sites that could support “virtual communities” of millions of members were created beginning in 1993.

More than half of all Internet users accessed social networking sites each month during the first three quarters of 2009 according to Alexa (www.alexa.com), a service that tracks activity on hundreds of Internet sites. Teens and adults in their twenties are much more likely than their older counterparts to visit social networking sites, with 75 percent of teens and adults 18-24 doing so, compared to just seven percent of adults 65 and over.

History

While the early social networking sites had hundreds-of-thousands of members, the reality was that members tended to communicate primarily with those they already knew or whom they would like to know, usually locally.

The earliest social networking site appears to be Match.com, an online dating site launched in 1993. The first business oriented social networking site appears to be Ryze.com, a site launched in 2001 to help members leverage their business networks in the San Francisco Bay area. Friendster was launched a year later as a social complement to Ryze and a competitor to the Match.com. It differed from Match.com in that it was designed to help friends-of-friends meet, rather than total strangers. Friendster was the

first site to have more than two million members. The membership of Ryze, Friendster and the other social networking sites consisted almost entirely of adults. Like most sites that focused on adult membership, these sites never grew to the large membership of Match.com and Facebook, sites that solicit membership by teens. As of 2009, Match.com had 15 million members, Ryze had 500,000, and Friendster had 35 million, almost all of them in Asia.

MySpace (www.myspace.com), which was launched in 2003, differed from these earlier social networking sites in that it accepted organizations as well as individuals as members. Scores of bands, especially Southern California indie-rock bands, began creating profiles and local promoters began to advertise VIP passes to popular clubs. The connections among “friends” were thus augmented by the connection between bands and “fans.” Drawn by the presence of the bands, teenagers began joining MySpace en masse by 2004. MySpace subsequently began to actively solicit minors as members. The News Corporation purchased MySpace in 2005.

The site allows users to customize their user profile pages by entering HTML, but not JavaScript, into areas such as "About Me," "I'd Like to Meet," and "Interests." Videos and flash-based content can be included this way. Users also have the option to add music to their profile pages via MySpace Music, a service that also allows bands to post songs for use on MySpace. A user can also change the general appearance of his or her page.

MySpace was the most popular social networking site in the United States until 2007, but ranked fifth behind Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, and Twitter in the third quarter of 2009. It saw a 20 percent drop in number of visitors in the first half of 2009 and laid off 30 percent of its workforce. Nevertheless, it still had more than 100 million members worldwide. In October of 2009, MySpace’s president announced that the focus of the site would shift to the delivery of music and entertainment. It struck a deal with Apple’s iTunes to allow its users to buy tracks without having to leave the MySpace site. It also announced the largest catalog of music videos on the Web. Membership consists primarily of young people between the ages of 13 and 24.

A number of public libraries have a presence on MySpace, including the Atlanta Public Library, Brooklyn Public Library, Buffalo & Erie County Public Library System, Cuyahoga County Public Library, Denver Public Library, the Lansing Library, New Orleans Public Library, Omaha Public Library, St. Paul Public Library, Salt Lake City Public Library, and the Toledo Public Library.

Facebook (www.facebook.com) was launched in 2004 as a social networking site for those who had a Harvard University e-mail address. It soon began to support those with other universities' e-mail accounts. The intent was to support social networking within each academic community, not among communities. In 2005, Facebook expanded to include high school students and professionals in corporate networks. By the following year, anyone at least 13 years of age could join, but many of the school and professionals in corporate networks continued to maintain restrictions on access to their members.

A user can join and create up to 200 groups according to his/her interests. Facebook allows only plain text and photos. Users can set their profiles on public or on private—the latter restricts access to designated others. Revenue is exclusively derived from banner ads.

As of the fourth quarter of 2009, Facebook had five times as many visitors each month in the United States than MySpace despite the fact that the latter had more U.S. members. Worldwide, Facebook membership was almost 300 million. Membership is concentrated in the 14 to 34 year age group, with the greatest concentration young people of high school and college age.

A number of public libraries have a presence on Facebook, including the Boston Public Library, Brooklyn Public Library, Chicago Public Library, Hennepin County Library, Houston Public Library, Los Angeles Public Library, and the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. Some public libraries have chosen to target teens exclusively, including the Danvers (MA) Library and the Cranford (NJ) Library.

Flickr (www.flickr.com) was also launched in 2004 as a web site for the sharing of images and videos. It included a chat room with real-time photo exchange capabilities. Increasingly, it became a photo repository for bloggers and the chat room was dropped. The site has been owned by Yahoo since March of 2005. Yahoo introduced two types of accounts: Free and Pro. Free account users are allowed to upload 100 MB of images and two videos a month; Pro account users, who pay a fee, are not limited in what they can upload and receive unlimited bandwidth and storage.

As of the third quarter of 2009, the site had 32 million members and was the fourth most popular social networking site in terms of number of visitors, just ahead of MySpace. The age of visitors is concentrated in the 18 to 50 range.

The Library of Congress, the DeKalb County Public Library, District of Columbia Public Library, Evanston Public Library, Newport Public Library and the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, and many museums and archives post images on Flickr. While there is an opportunity for those accessing the postings on Flickr to leave comments, libraries report receiving very few.

YouTube (www.youtube.com), which was launched in 2005, is a video sharing web site on which users can upload and share videos. Unregistered users can watch the videos; registered users are permitted to upload an unlimited number of videos. YouTube has been owned by Google since late 2006. Revenue is derived from banner ads.

YouTube is the second most popular social networking site in the U.S., with more than four times as many visitors each month than MySpace and almost as many as FaceBook. The age distribution is the broadest of any social networking sites, ranging from 15 to 55.

A number of public libraries have posted videos on YouTube, including the Brooklyn Public Library, Chicago Public Library, Cleveland Public Library, Columbia

Public Library, Denver Public Library, New York Public Library, Pittsburg Public Library and Seattle Public Library. Several of the videos posted by libraries hem have gotten five star ratings, the highest ratings YouTube users can bestow.

Twitter (www.twitter.com) was launched in 2006 as a free social networking and micro-blogging service that enables its users to send and read messages known as tweets. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the author's profile page and delivered to the author's subscribers who are known as followers. Senders can limit delivery to those in their circle of friends or, by default, allow open access. Users can also receive tweets. While the text message are limited in length, a tweet can include a link to a URL.

As of the third-quarter of 2009, Twitter had 44 million members and almost as many visitors each month as YouTube, ranking it third among social networking sites. The age range was 18-45.

Twitter has been effectively used in election campaigns to contact followers and by news media seeking comment on news stories. It does not appear to be much used by libraries. When they do use it, tweets are sent announcing library events. Among the public libraries using the site are the Boise Public Library, DC Public Library, Fullerton Public Library, Mountain View Public Library, and New York Public Library.

While there are hundreds of other social networking sites, MySpace, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, and Twitter are the most visited. As of the third-quarter of 2009, they were the most widely used by public libraries.

Successful Use

It is difficult to gauge the success of libraries' use of social networking sites. If it were to be measured by the number of friends the libraries have tallied, success has not yet been achieved. Most libraries have only a few hundred friends; none has more than

10,000. On average, two-tenths of one percent of the population served by a library have identified themselves as “friends” of their library on a social networking site. [The calculation was made dividing the number of friends of 31 libraries by the population that the libraries serve].

While a large number of friends is not the only measure of success, it is the only measure that is readily available. To the extent that libraries have been able to attract people who are not regular users of libraries, even a small response could be considered success. Unfortunately, there appear to be no studies of the demographics of persons who have accessed libraries on social library network services.

One possible explanation for the small numbers of friends of libraries on social networking sites is offered by Meredith Farkas in a May, 2006 blog (<http://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/2006/05/10/libraries-in-social-networking-software>). While she thought that libraries using social networking was a good idea, she opined that “most libraries are doing it really badly. [If the goal] “is to look cool or to [increase awareness of the library], don’t bother. A profile that offers nothing but a picture of the library, a blog post or two and a cutesy thing about how we won’t shush, you just look ‘cheesy.’ I think there is a big difference between ‘being where our patrons are’ and ‘being USEFUL to our patrons where they are.’”

Many of the libraries that have a presence on social networking sites focus on one-way communication. Those that encourage feedback by emphasizing the comments area and soliciting suggestions for book and music titles the library should consider adding appear to have a larger number of friends in relation to population served. Also effective is the creation of a library portal within the social networking site. That not only facilitates access to the patron access catalog and other electronic resources, but to the library calendar, and to an “ask the librarian” link.

One public library has solicited recommendations for games the library should purchase. In a short period of time, it not only received many recommendations, but the

number of friends doubled. The library has the highest ratio of friends to population served of any library for which statistics were checked. Another public library features reviews of books, music, and movies by teens. It too has a significant number of friends in relation to the size of the population served.

A few public libraries have added links to authors on the same social networking site as the library. Anecdotal evidence suggests that has been popular, especially with teens.

Several public libraries maintain more than one presence on a social networking service, one specifically for teens and another for adults. That seems to increase the number of teens who identify themselves as friends.

Denver Public Library created a music video for YouTube featuring “kitty,” a person inside a cat costume, who decides that going to the library for the summer reading program is more fun than anything else. The video has been rated five stars by viewers. (<http://library20.ning.com/video/video/show?id=515108%3AVideo%3A19475>).

Telephone interview with librarians in libraries with a large number of teen fans on social networking services revealed that the majority had involved teens in planning the library’s presence.

Facebook and MySpace appear to be more successful reaching teens than the other social networking sites, not only because they have a very high percentage of teen members, but also because feedback is much easier than for the other major sites. Flickr and YouTube appear to be more successful for posting a great deal of content, especially collections of images and manuscripts. Twitter is effective for sending and receiving brief messages.

Sources of Information

Libraries are still learning about social library networking services. There are few recent, substantive journal articles on the subject, but a large number of blogs. A search for “social networking and libraries” will turn up scores of them. Of greater value is searching for “public library” on any of the major social networking sites and seeing what has actually been done and how much response the libraries have been getting.

For insight into teens’ use of social networking sites and the Internet generally, the studies undertaken by the Pew Foundation (<http://pewinternet.org/Reports/>) are particularly useful. The broad topics to access the reports are “teens” and “social networks.”

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