

SEOCial Networking – Search Marketing and Social Networks

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What is Social Networking and how will it affect online marketing in the coming years? That's a question a number of people have been thinking about since the dawn of the commercial 'net. In the earliest days, online social networks formed between users of bulletin board services (BBS). People met each other by joining the board with planned, in-person gatherings taking over entire cafes. That was a time so geeky it seems quaint in remembrance. Today's social networks are enormous, robust and sophisticated. The medium is a lot of things but these days, there's nothing geeky about it.

Ever since Friendster established itself as the dominant "circle of friends" networking tool in 2003, younger Internet users have trended towards accessing the Internet primarily as a social space, as opposed to a purely informative space. This trend has been gaining momentum for a while but in the past year, a bulk of new users has accelerated adoption of the medium to the point where the most popular network, [MySpace](#) sees more traffic in a day than Google does.

Something about a statement that ends with, "... more traffic in a day than Google does." makes a search marketer's eyebrows rise. One of the most solid rules of the web says that users dictate what happens to any new piece technology. As they adopt new ideas or technologies and adapt to them, they begin to innovate new ways of using that technology. Invention begets innovation. People inform each other and the faster that happens, the faster things change through invention and innovation.

The reason it is so hard to put your finger on what Web2.0 is from a search marketing perspective, is that it is a rapidly moving target and difficult to actually point at. To be basic and blunt, there are two ways of looking at the web as an advertising medium and both are still valid though the latter is rapidly supplanting the former. These two types of thinking are happening concurrently in most SEO and SEM shops but the new types of user will eventually overwrite previously established ideas and norms that form the old way of thinking.

The classic way of viewing search engine marketing has users accessing the Internet using a number of unique applications they are comfortable with. Some use IE, some use Firefox. Some use Google while others use Yahoo. This group primarily accesses information by seeking it out from scratch. They search, and, if we have done our jobs properly, they find what we want them to. They connect, our clients do some business and we hope that visitor keeps coming back. The web, for many of its users is an intricate and never ending series of one-way streets. You can always get there; find what you need and leave, returning only when necessary.

Another way of viewing the web has users accessing the net through a social portal offering search and recommendation options. People who like each other (in the offline world) tend to like or do the same things. They tend to have similar interests that somehow draw them together. Now that they know each other, they begin to inform each other. This basically is the way Top40 radio worked for decades. Today of course, everyone is a DJ and virtually everything is of interest to visitors drawn from a global audience. Some kid in Mississauga Ontario named Kari doesn't know it but an MP3 track planted in her personal Myspace site has just told me about a band I really want to check out. When I get around to it, I'm likely to add it to the recommendations list on my new Myspace profile/site.

As a search marketing application, the basic concept of social networking is simple. There are multiple points of connections between almost anyone on Earth. Working from that basic truism, virtually anything imaginable is possible to find, share, enjoy, and track, providing a cross-reference can be found. With social network applications, user choices and preferences are saved, stored, shared and used to build rapidly growing chains of endorsements.

As those cross-references are established, the profile of a person, company or service provider, along with its traditional website increases in recognition and reputation. Think about how links affect rankings at Google but on a different, more chaotic sort of scale. As search marketers however, our job is to get our clients' sites recognized and to build traffic across their domains using whatever legitimate means is available and relevant to their business.

A similar social network, [LinkedIn](#), has formed for the IT business community. After accepting an invitation to register, new users suddenly find themselves able to browse an online Rolodex made up of everyone in that network's contact list. It is surprising to actually see how quickly the range of connections through the search marketing community leads to folks like the director of search products for AOL, a VP at RazorFish, along with over 5000 other possible contacts.

By nature, most of the SEO and SEM community are focused on the classic way of viewing the Internet as a marketing medium. It will continue that way for the foreseeable future. Even as a new and highly dynamic wave of web users is introducing Wiki communities, Wikipedia, MySpace and other participation driven applications, organic search results as supplied by Google, Yahoo, MSN, Ask and the rest will continue to be integrated into those applications. At the same time, user-popularity is becoming an important factor in the ranking algorithms of the major search engines. Google for example, uses bookmarks, personal references and repeat visits as a gauge of relevance and importance.

With the exception of our experimentation and research, StepForth's services are primarily targeted towards the web as a one-way street. While we preach the gospel of blogging and RSS, and our SEO techniques, consultation and recommendations have been moving rapidly to encompass usability and accessibility principles, the opportunity and necessity to embrace social networking on behalf of our clients has not previously arisen.

Then again, we had not previously read statements that ended with, "... more traffic in a day than Google does." Suddenly, we are paying a lot more attention to the power of social networking.