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Notes from the Field: Social Networking is For Real

By Jim Ware and Charlie Grantham

Last month we wrote about the explosion of interest in social networking – probably the most popular manifestation of the so-called “Web 2.0” (“[Notes from the Field: Social Networking Comes of Age](#),” *Future of Work Agenda*, November, 2008).

In that article we asked you to voluntarily complete a very brief survey about your awareness of and participation in a wide range of specific online communities and network sites. This month we’re pleased to report on the results of that survey.

First, many thanks to the more than 70 of you who actually responded to and completed the survey. We’re grateful to you for your active interest in social networks, and for your willingness to share your experiences and perspectives. While we fully understand that we can’t claim to have a statistically valid sample of the adult population, or even of our own readers, we do believe we’ve got enough data to offer a useful glimpse into the world of social networking.

So, without any further introductory comments here’s a brief summary of what you told us.

[LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#) are by far the most popular of the true social networking sites you use (74.3% of respondents belong to LinkedIn, with 44.3% actually using it; while 71% belong to Facebook and, 44.9% use it). [Yahoo Groups](#) is a distant third with a 48.5% membership percentage at a 44.1 usage rate.

Among the other sites we asked you about, [YouTube](#), [PlaxoPulse](#), and [Twitter](#) were also popular, although at significantly lower levels of participation. Note, however, that these different sites have clearly different purposes and are used very differently as well. For example, fully 76.8% of you *use* YouTube, even though only about 40% of you have actually registered on the site and thus reported that you “belong” to it.

It’s also revealing that while more of you “belong” to LinkedIn than to any other site, a higher percentage of you reported *using* YouTube and Facebook on a regular basis than you do LinkedIn. In fact, the belong/use ratio for LinkedIn is only 60%, whereas for Facebook it’s a slightly higher 63% and for YouTube it is an impressive 91%.

We have to admit that these ratios are completely consistent with our own personal experiences. We don’t really think of YouTube as a genuine *community* (although we know others do) even though we visit it regularly (although most of those visits are “referrals” from other sites that have an embedded YouTube video). And while we both belong to LinkedIn neither of us uses it all that frequently. We’re both relatively new to Facebook and still exploring its possibilities.

We were also curious about when you first joined each of these (and several other) sites. We’re trying to gauge the rates of growth both for individual sites and for the whole phenomenon. IT looks like 2007 was the year of biggest and most rapid growth for these sites in general. Interestingly, for all the attention social networking is getting this year, the rate of joining new sites has actually slowed from last year (suggesting of course that our readers are early adopters well ahead of the curve).

It's also interesting that the most popular site in 2006 and earlier was clearly Yahoo Groups. Our "take" is that sites like LinkedIn and Facebook have leapfrogged Yahoo Groups because of their more user-friendly designs and more sophisticated features.

We also sense that the various sites' features are blending and becoming less and less distinctive – it's a classic case of imitation being the best form of flattery. Whatever seems to attract people to one site quickly gets picked up and added to the others. All of us as "consumers" clearly benefit from the increase in choices, but we don't see how the individual sites will be able to maintain any distinctive competitive advantage.

Which brings us to one final point. It's also very obvious that most of you belong to several sites, although each of you tends to use one or two of them much more often than you do the others. If our math is right (and it usually is), on average you belong to more than five sites today. Of course, we're reasonably confident you don't belong to five sites that all do the same thing. After all, LinkedIn, YouTube, [Flickr](#), and [TripAdvisor](#) are pretty clearly playing in separate niches in the broad space we call Social Networking.

And as a final comment, we want to acknowledge that we didn't include the many other sites (including the millions of blogs out there) that include some form of product rating system and room for comments from readers. Places like [Amazon.com](#), [Netflix](#), [DailyKos](#), [HuffingtonPost](#), and even that "old grey lady" the [New York Times](#) all support and actively encourage their own social communities of sorts.

There's more data from the survey than we've been able to report here. If you're as much of a data junkie as we are, feel free to dig into the summary data yourself – just [click here](#) to take a look.

And thanks once again to the 73 of you who contributed to our learning about this incredibly fascinating new arena. The web really *is* becoming a conversation/communication medium – and we find that wonderfully exciting.

Please [send your comments directly to us](#), or post a comment on the blog version of this article. We look forward to learning from you.

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