

Twitter: A Fresh Face for Social Networking

How Can I Communicate? Let Me Count the Ways

With social networking websites adding new ways to communicate on what seems like a daily basis, the casual internet user may have difficulty keeping up. Only twenty years ago, “electronic communication” included telephones and fax machines. Ten years ago, everyone had a blog and used email. In a span of ten years, a majority of Americans “got online.”

Today, there are countless options for communicating through the internet, and software developers are creating new options every day. In this fast paced arena of communication, internet users may find it hard to discern between the current fad and legitimate breakthroughs in new ways to communicate.

I cite my personal experience as an example. In junior high and high school, my peers and I primarily communicated by Instant Messaging and a blogging site called Xanga, which included some limited applications of social networking.

When I graduated from high school, the trend moved away from Xanga and toward MySpace. MySpace, in contrast to Xanga, offered social networking as the main draw, and tacked on some limited applications of blogging as a secondary purpose.

About two years later, Facebook came on the scene. Early versions of Facebook offered social networking only, with no blogging function. Unlike MySpace, Facebook maintained stricter content and design control and did not allow users to customize or accessorize their profiles. A tighter reign on the look and feel of the website gave Facebook a cleaner and more intuitive interface, which drew a larger pool of users.

Facebook has now eclipsed many other past social networking applications simply by replacing them. Facebook provides live chat (no need to instant message), private messaging (instead of email), and notes (that serve as a blogging function), along with a number of other applications. When I visit Xanga or Myspace today, I explore something of a cyber cemetery, because none of my friends have updated for the past 18 months.

Is Twitter the “Next Big Thing?”

Twitter blends two genres of communication: a blog post and a text message. Though an unlikely combination, Twitter takes the form of text message and gives it the function of a blog post (called a “tweet”). Formally defined, tweet is a 140-character answer to the question, “What are you doing?” Twitter experts

refer to this new genre as micro-blogging, with avid users “tweeting” several times a day.

One of the objectives for a Twitter user is to accumulate the most followers (i.e. people who follow your tweets). Users “follow” other users and can interact with other users’ tweets. Twitter calls the people a user follows “friends.” A user’s homepage shows their friends’ most recent tweets.

To gain more followers, Twitter experts advise users to tweet often, and follow as many people as possible. However, Twitter does not require that users follow their followers in return. In other words, if I choose to follow Shaquille O’Neal, Twitter notifies him that he has a new follower, but does not require him to follow me. Facebook, in contrast, requires connections be mutually confirmed from both sides. Twitter’s move away from this practice places emphasis on the user’s need to write quality tweets in order to gain followers.

Twitter vs. Facebook

Twitter uniquely provides a forum that is much more public and anonymous than other social networking websites. All tweets are viewable and searchable by anyone unless users specifically change their privacy settings to keep their tweets “locked” (meaning they are only viewable to people the user specifies).

While Facebook contains highly personal information, but has limited access to the outside world, Twitter intends to include *little personal information* and offer *easy access* to tweets by the outside world. Instead of displaying personal information about themselves, Twitter encourages users to share ideas, links, and opinions that can be interacted with on an anonymous level. This difference in intent helps Twitter survive the cutthroat competition of social networking sites.

Twitter’s clean design and simple interface also aid its success. In a world full of choices and customizations, web users grow tired of trying to figure out how to find information on the internet, and tend to prefer standardized applications that display limited amounts of information.

In response to this trend, Twitter very wisely limits the website to reading, posting, and following. Originally, Twitter had included some additional features such as commenting on another person’s tweet, but when only 10% users used the function, Twitter removed the feature. This commitment to a clean, intuitive interface gives Twitter the edge over other social networking websites.

Due to its narrow scope, Twitter will probably never replace Facebook. However, Facebook seems to be finding it surprisingly difficult to replace Twitter. This is unexpected given the countless other social applications Facebook has rendered obsolete by offering redundant functions.

Facebook has no trouble offering the same function as Twitter. In fact, the creators of Facebook introduced micro-blogging-like “status updates” in 2007. What Facebook *cannot* compete with Twitter on is its lightweight simplicity. Similar to the shift from MySpace’s customizable profiles to Facebook’s standard profiles, Twitter draws users away from Facebook by avoiding the trappings of multiple functions (i.e. messaging, photo hosting, video hosting, blogging, games, polls, link sharing, groups, etc.) for the use of a single function.

Twitter’s Future

While Twitter is currently undergoing rapid growth, it only retains 40% of its users. The so-called “Twitter Quitters” join and then stop posting after an average two weeks. One reason for this low retention is that Twitter requires such a high amount of effort before users can experience its benefits. Another reason new users quit might also be that micro-blogging simply does not have a place in our world. As members of a fast-paced society, we might not have the time or need to keep an anonymous audience updated on our opinions and witticisms. Yet, perhaps Twitter serves a grander and more significant purpose.

Twitter currently sits on the edge of a precipice between becoming an essential form of communication and falling out of favor along with a growing list of popular but short-lived fads in social networking websites. Twitter clearly brings a fresh face to the world of communication, and there is no application better for micro-blogging. All Twitter has to do now is convince the world that they need to micro-blog.