

The total guide to Social Media

From the dawn of MySpace to the era of Facebook, social networking and social media have grown to become the toast of Silicon Valley, and the pastime of billions. Not sure where to begin? Our guide will talk you through...

You will have heard the phrase 'social media' bandied around before, along with phrases like 'web 2.0'. Buzzword it may be, but right now there are more than a billion people out there sharing everything from what band they've just seen play to pictures of their holidays and links to breaking news reports and videos, and it's hard to deny the importance of that.

So what is it? Social media is simply people coming together (online) to share what matters to them. If that sounds a bit like an Internet forum, it is. Web forums are as old as the Internet, but broadband penetration and advances in web technology have made social media mainstream: think of social media as forums in real time. And social networks, like Facebook, Twitter and even YouTube, are the main channels for social media to reach the masses.

What's really brought social media into the modern age however has been the shift from private to public on the Internet. Twitter, which lets you post messages up to 140 characters in length (thereby forcing you to be brief) showed how well a social network could work if it contained more than just your friends.

Facebook responded by subtly switching the default setting of many features to public, so that anyone could see your pictures or profile. A media uproar followed. Facebook (and rival social network Google+) introduced details like privacy settings to make up for this, but few people cared, and more and more people kept signing up.

Spot the difference

Nevertheless, the different social media outlets do serve different purposes. Some are simply dictated by their format. YouTube is for sharing videos, either with your friends (you can set clips to private) or the world. Instagram is for quickly editing and sharing photos taken on your iPhone or Android smartphone. Qik is for streaming live video from wherever you are.

But for some networks (the ones that let you post just about anything) the differences aren't so clear. Facebook is for photos, videos – information about your life that your friends would want to know about.

Twitter is for just about anything, from idle chatter to sharing news and views. It's more 'real-time' than Facebook, with updates showing only in reverse chronological order. You can post much more often without people labelling you as 'spamming' or oversharing. But Twitter is also public, and people choose to 'follow' you, unlike on Facebook and Google+, where you make a mutual decision to be friends on the network. You can't filter that in anyway, only choose who you follow instead.

The public/private issue has been a hot potato in the media for years now – it's easy to assume that the push to public social media is simply a way for companies to learn more about you and make adverts more valuable – but it's also what should help you decide what to post and where. Who will see what I post?

The rise of mobile

A huge factor in the growth of social media has been the boom in mobile computing and smartphones in recent years. It's not just about getting adverts on yet another screen, though: mobile is important because the smartphone is the computer that many people carry around with them all day, and the one they use to document the things they do and like.

Social media is about capturing those moments when they happen, and a phone with an Internet connection lets you do just that. You'll find apps for every major platform on every type of phone, and if it's not from the developer of the network itself you can bet a budding coder will have made their own version for you anyway – just have a search on your phone's app store or online.

Some apps are even built into the phone's operating system itself. You can tweet and share directly from apps in the iPhone, and connect your Facebook profile to your address book in many others. In an acknowledgement of its importance, earlier this year Facebook bought Instagram – run by a team of just 13 – in a deal worth \$1 billion.

Mobile is also the only way billions of people will and do have access to the Internet: and the more people who have access and can have their say, the more – social; social media becomes.

Businesses get onboard

With billions of people on board, it should come as no surprise to find that businesses are getting on board with social media too. No major brand today is without its own Facebook page and Twitter profile for customers and potential customers, and the smarter ones even use viral YouTube videos to get their message across – people will share a video, even if it's branded with a company's logo, so long as it's emotive.

In truth, the businesses that are successful on social networks are simply using the same approach that the people with thousands of followers on Twitter or Instagram use: they try to be interesting.

While Facebook can simply be a means to stay in touch with friends you already have, if you want to build up subscribers (people who can follow your updates, but aren't connected to you as friends), or Twitter followers, you have to share thoughts, images, videos and web links that others will want to see and share themselves.

Want people to see your Instagram snaps and comment on them? Make sure they're good shots to start with. Want people to – retweet – your thoughts on Twitter to their followers as well? Talk about what you know or love, and be insightful. Start debates, give your opinion, break news, but don't post a picture of your breakfast, unless you happen to be sharing it with Kirani James.

Ultimately, the challenge for every social media user remains the same: social media might help you find an audience faster, but it's up to you to make them stay.

The first billion-user social network

It was far from the first social network, but Facebook has become synonymous with the term, evolving from a Harvard dormitory start-up into a multi-national social media business with billions of dollars in revenue. It's succeeded where others failed by ruthlessly evolving, adding in new features that its users have sometimes objected to at first, but often grown to love, from 'news' updates to 'timeline' profile pages.

As a result, Facebook's more than a social network: it's a platform, a chat app, a place to play games, listen to music and much more. It's not just a website for desktop computers: it's available on everything from tablets and smartphones to the lowliest phones, sometimes even for free using a service called 0.facebook.com. In October 2012 the social network reached the milestone of a staggering one billion active users logging in every month — but that still leaves six billion more to go.

Stay safe on social

Social networking can be fun, but like anything online you need to follow some safety:

1. Don't let twelve-year-olds and under on Facebook

Facebook's terms and conditions actually specify that you must be 13 or over to join, so make sure your children don't join until they are. Whatever you join, check the fine print first.

2. Check your privacy settings

On Facebook and Google+, once you've added your friends, make sure you set what they — and the public at large — can see by diving into the settings and creating groups. If you're setting up an account for your child, you should make sure that no posts are public, and all content is only visible to direct friends.

3. Assume everything is public

Even if your privacy settings are watertight, be careful of what you post. Just because your boss can't see your rant about him or her, it doesn't mean someone else won't copy and paste it to show them. Assume everything could end up being public.

4. Watch what you pay

Facebook's core service may be free, but it isn't just a social network. It's an arcade too, with many games that let you play for free, but charge you to play more, or to buy in-game bonuses or items. Be wary of these.

5. Always log out

A Facebook profile may seem harmless, but you should always be vigilant with its security, as people can glean a lot of information from it. Change your password every few months, and never leave your profile logged in on a public computer. If you're logged into your social network on a mobile phone, make sure you put a password or pin code on it.

6. Don't say where you're not

While it can be tempting to post updates about where you are, don't say publicly where you won't be, when.

7. Click carefully

Facebook and Twitter scams are common. If you see what appears to be an unusual message from a friend encouraging you to click on a strange link, don't. If anyone receives a similar message from you, change your passwords.

