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We're just Google Eyes over the IPO but are we missing another important trend...

New wave of social network services are creating exciting behavior marketing trends....

By Peter L. Klinge, Jr.

The new crop represents a significant behavior marketing trend with potential that exceeds the current fascination with search marketing. The social network category while still nascent and the business models, i.e., how they'll make money unclear; offer several competitive and differentiated approaches to helping people connect, communicate, and build communities across varied and distinct interest groups.

Most people are familiar with Friendster and Blogger (now owned by Google). Since their appearance numerous others have popped up on email invitation lists. They represent varied approaches which can be defined as follows: consumer/business hybrid, business, enterprise, and art/creative communication.

Six degrees of separation is the driving principle for all of them.

Computing power and connectivity enables a rich networked community. Remarkably, some accomplished social networkers have literally thousands of connections in their address book. It's difficult to understand how all of those connections could be trusted and valuable colleagues.

The social network category at times appears to smack of a huge multi-level marketing pyramid. And definitely one should take a caveat emptor approach to participating. Experience with the ones highlighted below indicate good intentions and safeguards by their company leaders. The main thing to think about is what you as a user want to get out of joining. There's something for everyone, and that is the exciting and cool appeal of participating.

The following companies represent an evolutionary step from a pure play consumer focus. Below are general observations of some social network services and their relative values. Check them out and decide what's right for you:

Consumer/business hybrid:

www.Tribe.net and www.Ryze.com. Both of these offer general networking possibilities across diverse interest groups. I appreciate that the company founders are attempting to position their services for business networking, but I just didn't see as much value in this category.

The interest categories from a business perspective become so narrow, or create your own, that it's hard to see as much value in the higher end business space. For example, I'm developing a professional services business and I received contacts for selling shampoo from home. For consumers there are lots of interesting people and exciting communities, especially if you're into sharing personal information, pictures, etc.

Business: www.Linkedin.com and www.Spoke.com. LinkedIn offers the most professional networking community observed. It is definitely oriented toward organizing professional contacts by industry, function, geography, and areas of interest such as deal making, and job search. Senior executives: VP, C-level, entrepreneurs, and VCs are prominent in the network. The profile summary and endorsement areas are great ideas.

Spoke appears focused on business development and lead generation; not as familiar with this one, but doesn't appear as well developed as LinkedIn.

Enterprise: www.visiblepath.com If a company struggles to manage its customer leads and relationships because the sales force frequently turns over, then here's an option. Visible Path's sales productivity applications help an enterprise manage its relationship network of customers, prospects, and leads. The company's solutions link to an enterprise's sales force

automation, CRM, and business intelligence programs.

Art/creative communication:

www.netomat.net This company is different from the others. The emphasis is on creative oriented collaboration versus networking connections. In the company's words...A netomat is your own collaborative web page that you can use for back-and-forth communication with family, friends and colleagues. Post text, photos, drawings, play games and more! Create web pages in a tech-free and fun way...

Collaboration involves people in creating netomats which encourages individuals to subscribe. There's a free basic, trial version for users.

The service usage and functionality evolves as users find new applications. I've been using netomat for both personal and business uses, e.g., picture album displays, business white boards and client surveys.

Upgraded services are provided for reasonable fees: \$3.95 monthly or \$23.95 annually. In the future there will be multi-media versions available on wireless devices such as mobile phones. (Disclaimer: netomat has been a client of the author.)

Social network business model

In each category it's obvious that the services equate joining with some value proposition. Many are still in beta and reasonably well funded by VCs. The business models will likely depend upon generating subscription, use fees, and/or advertising revenues. Gauging the adoption and retention rates of these services as they transition from free to pay will be indicative of their long term viability.

Admittedly, it's easy to get hooked on some of these once you're connected. Of course, that's the idea and naturally there are no company guarantees you'll achieve what you want from joining, i.e. the perfect mate, better job, or new business... success is directly tied to how good a networker you are!

The companies actively promote signing up your friends and colleagues because the

more connections the better your chance at whatever success you seek. It's a perfect business model circle. The companies get more users to create bigger numbers of customers to sell to, and users scramble to add more connections to their address book.

I've approached social networking with fairly modest expectations. At a minimum these services offer a great virtual rolodex to keep track of people who are constantly on the move.

Who knows what the upside is... be a great networker, have fun, and see for yourself. It's often the experience of the new and novel that's worthwhile. Certainly each of these services are innovative.

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