Amazon steps up social media efforts

Alistair Barr, Reuters

Amazon.com Inc is stepping up social media efforts after the largest Internet retailer partially missed one of the hottest technology trends of recent years.

Amazon hired a director of social media, John Yurcisin, from WPP's Ogilvy & Mather earlier this year to help the company come up with social strategies. He is the brother of Jeff Yurcisin, the general manager of Shopbop.com, an apparel retail website owned by Amazon.

The company is also building a Social Games Group to take on Zynga, the leader in the space which is preparing for an initial public offering.

Amazon is hiring developers and engineers for the effort. A poster in a kitchen area on Amazon's new Seattle campus unveiled the Social Games Group as "Worldwide Breaking News."

"The Group is growing fast!" Amazon said on the poster. "We're actively looking."

The company poster expresses most interest in software development engineers and Flash developers, the latter likely referring to Adobe System's Flash, which is used to add video, animation and other interactive content to websites.

Amazon has also posted social games jobs on LinkedIn and tech jobs website Dice.com. One August 15 LinkedIn posting for a Senior Social Games engineer said the group is "working on a cutting edge initiative within Amazon."

Amazon was a pioneer in e-commerce, electronic books and reading devices and cloud computing. But it has lagged in social networking and social media, leaving Facebook and Zynga as leaders in the area.

This occurred even as Amazon's main shopping website sported several social aspects that could have been exploited.

One long-time feature that has helped Amazon become the largest Internet retailer is the customer review section that occupies the bottom of most product pages. This was an early way to harness personal opinions on products, preceding such innovations as Facebook's popular "like" button.

When a purchase is made on Amazon's website, the company shows what other products were bought by people who made the same purchase.

Still, such information is sent to shoppers by Amazon. There is currently little ability for customers who have purchased similar items in the past to connect directly with each other. It is also difficult to find out automatically what friends have recently bought on Amazon.

It is not clear what John Yurcisin is working on at Amazon and a company spokesman declined to comment on Amazon's social plans.

Yurcisin's LinkedIn page lists him as "Director, Social" at Amazon and says he has been in the position since May.

Before that, he was Vice President, Marketing & Analytics at OgilvyOne, a big direct and interactive marketing business owned by Ogilvy & Mather.

Yurcisin's Twitter page lists him as "Director, Social Media" for Amazon with a focus on strategy, customer relationship management, digital and mobile.

Amazon is dipping its toes in social waters. The company added Twitter and Facebook social networking features to its popular Kindle electronic book offering.

Kindle e-book readers can send public notes about sections of the book they are reading. This is now integrated with people's Twitter and Facebook contacts.

(Reporting by Alistair Barr, editing by Matthew Lewis)

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