

Facebook looks to extend online reach, sharing

BARBARA ORTUTAY - AP Technology Writers - Associated Press

Facebook is trying to evolve from an Internet hangout where people swing by to share tidbits, links and photos to a homestead decorated with the memories, dreams and diversions of its 800 million users.

In what may be the boldest step yet in the company's seven-year history, Facebook is redesigning its users' profile pages to create what CEO Mark Zuckerberg says is a "new way to express who you are."

It is betting that despite early grumblings, its vast audience will become even more attached to a website that keeps pushing the envelope. To that effect, it is introducing new ways for people to connect with friends, brands and games while also sharing details about their lives from the mundane to the intimate.

"If you look at Facebook's history, obviously they are not afraid of making change," said Sean Corcoran, an analyst with Forrester Research. "They have done a lot of big changes in the past and people have gotten upset. But most of the time Facebook has been right."

Zuckerberg introduced the Facebook "timeline" along with new entertainment and media company partnerships on Thursday in San Francisco, at the annual "f8" conference attended by about 2,000 entrepreneurs, developers and journalists. The event was also being broadcast to, at one point, more than 100,000 online viewers.

The changes seek to transform how and how much people share things online, just as Facebook has been doing since its scrappy start as a college-only network. The overhaul also presents a new challenge for Google Inc., which has been scrambling to catch up with the launch of its own a social network, Google Plus, three months ago.

The timeline, which will eventually replace users' current profile pages, is reminiscent of an online scrapbook filled with the most important photos and text that they have shared on Facebook over the years. It's where people express their real selves and merge their online and offline lives even more than they are doing now.

The timeline can go back to include years before Facebook even existed, so users can add photos and events from, say 1995 when they got married or 1970 when they were born. Users can also add also music, maps and other content next to their memories.

"This radical redesign shows Facebook isn't done becoming what it wants to become," said eMarketer analyst Debra Aho Williamson. "In some respects, Google Plus almost looks dated now."

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Williamson expects there to be a big generational divide in how the broader sharing tools are perceived, with younger users embracing them more quickly. She also thinks Facebook should become even more attractive advertisers because it should be able to pick up even more data on what appeals to each user.

"They want you to share your authentic self online," she said.

Zuckerberg took the stage Thursday afternoon after a humorous skit, in which Saturday Night Live actor Andy Samberg impersonated him — as he sometimes does on SNL — and poked fun at Facebook. He introduced a "slow poke" button that takes 24 hours to reach its recipient and a new Facebook friend category for "I'm not really friends with these people."

The real Mark Zuckerberg looked considerably more playful and at ease than he has at past events, suggesting he is growing into his role as the public face of a company that is expected to go public in the stock market at some point next year.

But he quickly got down to business as he introduced the timeline as "the story of your life — all your stories, all your apps and a new way to express who you are."

The timeline feature will be rolling out to users in the coming months.

Expanding on its ubiquitous "like" buttons, Zuckerberg said Facebook will now let users connect to things even if they don't want to "like" them.

"We are making it so you can connect to anything you want. Now you don't have to like a book, you can just read a book," he said. "You don't have to like a movie; you can just watch a movie."

To this end, Facebook unveiled a slew of new partnerships with a slew of older and younger companies, ranging from The Washington Post to Netflix Inc. and from the struggling Yahoo Inc. to the hot music service Spotify.

Through a "ticker" feature partly unveiled earlier this week, Facebook users will be able to see the songs their friends have listened to, the shows they watched or the games they played in a live feed of activity on the right side of their pages.

Clicking through takes observers to the services. The diversions include Hulu videos, Zynga games, Spotify and another music subscription service, Rhapsody.

Axel Dauchez, the chief executive of music subscription service Deezer, which has 1.4 million paying customers in Europe, said the integration with Facebook was key to its plan to roll out in more than 130 countries over the next several weeks.

Instead of actively sharing each song they listen to, users who consent to sharing through Spotify, for instance, will now have all their activity on that app beamed to their Facebook friends. They can also listen to songs together with their friends.

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Marc Rotenberg, executive director of Washington DC-based Electronic Privacy Information Center, had some concerns.

"I guess our life is now packaged and streamed in real time," he said, adding that there's a sense that every time Facebook makes changes, more of its users' data gets pushed out into the public. Users then have to go back to their profile settings and reclaim this information.

To this end, Zuckerberg said Facebook users will have "complete control" on how they turn on an application.

"We are working out the rough edges now," he said.

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Ortutay reported from New York. AP Business Writer Ryan Nakashima contributed to this story from Los Angeles.

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