Yahoo redesign aims make site more inviting

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Yahoo is renovating the main entry into its website in an effort to get people to visit more frequently and linger for longer periods of time.

The long-awaited makeover of Yahoo.com's home page is the most notable change to the website since the Internet company hired Marissa Mayer as its CEO seven months ago. The new look will start to gradually roll out in the U.S early Wednesday.

It's the first time Yahoo has redesigned the page in four years. In that time, the company has seen its annual revenue drop by about 30 percent from $7.2 billion in 2008 to $5 billion last year as more online advertising flowed to rivals such as Internet search leader Google Inc. and social networking leader Facebook Inc.

Mayer, who spent 13 years helping to build Google into the Internet's most powerful company, has vowed to revive Yahoo Inc.'s revenue growth by establishing more of the company's services as daily habits that "delight and inspire" their users.

Yahoo.com's revamped home page figures to play a key role in determining whether Mayer, 37, realizes her ambition.

"We think this will be the new foundation for Yahoo," said Mike Kerns, the company's vice president of product.

Despite the company's recent financial malaise, Yahoo's home page has remained one of the Internet's top destinations. The page attracted 392 million worldwide visitors last month, a 7 percent increase from 365 million at the same time last year, according to the research firm comScore Inc. By comparison, Microsoft Corp.'s msn.com drew a crowd of 334 million, up 4 percent from last year.

But visitors haven't been spending as much time at Yahoo.com when they check in. They also haven't been making as many return visits each month. That's been a problem for many other websites, too, as Facebook and other online hangouts capture more of people's online time.

Yahoo's revamped home page isn't a radical new look, but there are enough changes that could make the website more addictive.

The biggest switch will be in how Yahoo determines which stories to show each visitor on the home page and how the information is displayed.

Kerns says Yahoo has developed more sophisticated formulas to determine which topics are most likely to appeal to different people so the news feed can be fine-tuned to cater to different tastes.

Yahoo, based in Sunnyvale, Calif., already knows a lot about people who have been coming to its website for years, particularly if they logged in while visiting. People willing to connect Yahoo with their social circles on Facebook also are more apt to see stories that appeal to them. That access will enable Yahoo to pick out stories about subjects tied to a person's interests on Facebook, either directly or through their online friendships.

The news feed also has been retooled so it is constantly refreshed with more material as a person scrolls down the page. The ability to endlessly peruse stories is ideally suited for viewing on smartphones and tablet computers controlled by touch, although the feature also works on desktop machines operated with a mouse or keyboard.

Yahoo's new home page also shows snippets of text from each story, borrowing a page from the Google playbook that Mayer helped write. Those summaries may be especially handy on the smaller screens of mobile devices, a growing market that Mayer has said Yahoo must do a better job reaching if the company hopes to bounce back.

To minimize the chances that its story selections will irritate users, Yahoo is also adding controls that make it easy to inform the website about which topics aren't of interest.

The right side of the new home page will be devoted to a stack of capsules that Yahoo calls "utilities."

The capsules are devoted to weather, finance, sports, friends' birthdays, video clips and Yahoo's Flickr site for photos. Each one can be programmed to automatically show what a user wants to see, such as the weather in a specific city, information about a certain sports teams or the stocks in an individual's investment portfolio. Any of the utilities can be scrapped.

The left side of the page will list various Yahoo services, although slightly fewer than in the old setup.

Yahoo is planning to display just two ads on the home page. It's an implicit bet that the price that the company can charge for those slots will steadily rise if people become more immersed in the rest of the content on the page.

Investors have been betting Mayer will deliver the turnaround that eluded the three other full-time CEOs that preceded her in the past five years. Yahoo's stock closed Tuesday at $21.29, up 36 percent since Mayer's arrival.

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