

# Facebook tries to stay hip with jazzier News Feed

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Facebook doesn't want to be dismissed as an Internet has-been before its social network even enters its adolescence.

In an effort to remain hip, it is infusing the focal point of its website with a more dynamic look and additional controls designed to empower its 1 billion users to sort streams of photos and other material into more organized sections that appeal to their personal interests.

The changes unveiled Thursday are an attempt to address complaints that Facebook's hub — the News Feed — is degenerating into a jumble of monotonous musings and disjointed pictures. This has come as users' social circles have widened from a few dozen people to an unwieldy assortment of friends, family, businesses, celebrities, co-workers and fleeting acquaintances.

That evolution requires a more nuanced approach than the computer-generated algorithms that Facebook has been relying on to pick out the most relevant content to display in each user's News Feed. The growing popularity of smartphones and tablet computers equipped with high-quality cameras also is turning the News Feed into a more visual gallery, another shift that Facebook is tackling by carving out more space to display photos and video.

Facebook Inc. CEO Mark Zuckerberg hopes the makeover turns the News Feed into something like a newspaper tailored to fit the particular interests of each user on every visit to the website.

"This gives people more power to dig deeper into the topics they care about," Zuckerberg said while discussing the makeover at Facebook's Menlo Park, Calif., headquarters.

By keeping Facebook relevant, Zuckerberg hopes to avoid the fate of his company's social networking forerunners, Friendster and MySpace. Those once-trendy sites quickly flamed out, largely because they didn't stay attuned to the changing interest of fickle audience. Making that mistake is even more costly in an age of increasingly short attention spans and technological tools that make it easy to find some other diversion with a quick click of the computer mouse or the swipe of a finger on a smartphone.

"They needed to freshen things up," said Brian Blau, research director of consumer technologies for Gartner Inc. "This should bring a lot of cooler things" into the News Feed.

Although Zuckerberg didn't say it, the overhaul also appears to be aimed at carving out more space to show larger and more compelling ads within the News Feed as

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Facebook seeks to boost its revenue and stock price.

Previous tweaks to the News Feed have triggered howls of protest among Facebook's users. Hoping to minimize the grousing this time around, Facebook intends to roll out the changes in phases. It will probably be at least six months before everyone who accesses Facebook on a personal computer sees the revamped News Feed, the company said. New mobile applications featuring the changes should be released within that time frame too.

The transition is likely to be completed before Facebook celebrates its 10th birthday next February.

The facelift is likely to be more jarring for those who only visit Facebook on a PC because it incorporates some features already deployed in the social network's mobile applications for smartphones and tablet computers.

The new features will enable users to choose to see streams of content that may feature nothing but photos or posts from their closest friends, family members or favorite businesses. Or they can just peruse content about music, or sports, as if they were grabbing a section of a newspaper. Other newspaper-like changes will include lists of events that users' social circles have flagged for the upcoming weekend and other summaries meant to resemble a table of contents.

Facebook still intends to rely on algorithms to select some material to feature on the main part of the News Feed, much like newspaper editors determine what goes on the front page.

The additional space being devoted to photos and video is an acknowledgement how dramatically the composition of Facebook's content has changed during the past 16 months. About 50 percent of the posts on News Feed now include a photo or video now, up from 25 percent in November 2011, according to Facebook's data.

Bigger pictures also will give advertisers a larger canvass to make their marketing pitches. Facebook is hoping marketers will seize the opportunity to develop more creative ways to entice and intrigue customers so advertising can become a more acceptable fixture on the social network.

More than anything else, the changes are meant to make Facebook a more fun place to hang out.

"This is all about keeping people engaged," Blau said.

Although Facebook's website remains one of the Internet's top destinations, there have been early signs that the social network is losing some of its pizzazz, particularly among younger Web surfers who are starting to spend more time on other fraternizing hubs such as Tumblr, Pinterest and Instagram, a photo-sharing site that Facebook bought for \$521 million last summer.

A phenomenon, known as "Facebook Fatigue," was recently documented in a report

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from Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project. The study found that about 61 percent of Facebook users had taken a hiatus for reasons that range from boredom to too much irrelevant information to Lent.

That's a worrisome trend for Facebook because the company needs to ensure that its audience keeps coming back so it can learn more about their interests and, ultimately, sell more of the advertising that brings in most of the company's revenue.

"I don't think it had turned into a crisis, but Facebook was probably seeing some internal data that was telling them they needed to do something," said Greg Sterling, a senior analyst for Opus Research.

Facebook has been struggling to find the right balance between keeping its fun-loving audience happy and selling enough ads to please investors who want the company to accelerate its revenue growth.

Wall Street seems to think the redesigned News Feed might be a step in the right direction. Facebook's stock gained \$1.13, or 4.1 percent, to close Thursday at \$28.58. The shares still remain 25 percent below the \$38 that they fetched in Facebook's initial public offering last May.

The mobile-friendly redesign of News Feed underscores the company's intensifying focus on smartphones and tablet computers as more of its users rely on those devices to interact on the social network.

About 23 percent, or \$306 million, of Facebook's advertising revenue came from the mobile market during the final three months of last year. Zuckerberg thinks more than half of Facebook's revenue will be coming more mobile devices within the next few years — a goal that should be easier to reach if the redesigned News Feed turns out to be as compelling as he envisions.

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