

Google boosts photo offerings to rival Facebook

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Google is digging deeper into its technology toolkit to turn its social networking service into a more formidable threat to Facebook, sprucing up its photo features at a time when sharing snapshots online and on mobile gadgets is growing more popular.

Many of the 41 new features being added to Google Plus beginning Wednesday will draw upon the computing power, machine learning, algorithms, semantics analysis and other innovations that established Google's search engine as the most influential force on the Internet.

"All of these features collectively put more of 'the Google' into Google Plus," said Vic Gundotra, Google's senior vice president of engineering, in an interview. "This will give people a powerful reason to come to Google Plus."

But the most compelling new attraction may be a new photo-management tool that promises to test how much control people want to cede to computers. It will also further blur the lines between a real moment in time and augmented reality.

Google promises the feature will pick out the best shots from a wide assortment of photos. The automatic photo selection is done by calling upon Google's knowledge of the elements that make up a visually pleasing picture, coupled with facial recognition technology and a vast database that helps tie together the relationships of people appearing in a photo. Google says its computers will recognize the best photos featuring family members or close friends of a person who uploads a bunch of pictures to Plus.

"You have amazing images of the most precious image of your life," Gundotra told a software developers conference Wednesday as he discussed the additions to Google Plus. "But if we are honest with each other photos are very labor intensive."

If the photos don't look quite right, Google is promising to enhance them, taking over a job that typically requires people to buy and master special photo editing software such as Adobe System Inc.'s Photoshop, Apple's iPhoto or Google's Picasa. Computer-controlled editing tools will automatically remove red eyes, soften skin tones, sharpen colors and adjust contrast. Google offers something similar through an "I'm Feeling Lucky" button on Picasa.

In an effort to get more photos onto the Plus network, Google is offering to back up all pictures taken on a mobile device, as soon as they're snapped. To accommodate the increased volume, Google Plus will now provide each account holder with up to 15 gigabytes of storage for full-resolution photos.

Gundotra believes Plus' management tools will be compelling because they are

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designed to save people the time and trouble of choosing and editing photos. Google Plus users will be able to compare all original photos with the versions altered by computers. The auto-enhancement tool can also be turned off.

Another new photo feature promises to stitch together a sequence of photos taken of the same group of people or a panoramic scene. This stitching system can be used to create a single photo that pulls the best shots of everyone featured in a series of pictures. It will also produce an animated clip featuring the motions of people captured in a succession of photos taken against the same background.

By appealing to people's photo fondness, Google is hoping to make Plus a more useful and fun place to hang out than Facebook. But Google Plus still hasn't proven it can become as much of a magnet as Facebook, largely because people had already established their online social circles at Facebook.

Google Plus has built up a broad swath of accountholders since its introduction nearly two years ago, mainly because so many people already had set up Google logins while using the company's Gmail or other services. Gundotra announced Wednesday that Google Plus now has 190 million users who interact on the service each month, up from 135 million in late December. About 390 million people log in to Google Plus each month, but that includes a large number who have tied their Gmail accounts to the social networking service. Facebook says it has about 1.1 billion active users.

As such, Google has a long way to go. Facebook has claimed the title of being the world's largest photo-sharing site for years, and with last year's purchase of Instagram only propelled it further ahead. Instagram has 100 million monthly active users, up from 22 million when Facebook agreed to buy it last spring.

Rather than offer powerful editing tools or high-quality pictures, Facebook became the most popular way to share the photos online simply because it is the most popular place to hang out online. Today, users upload more than 350 million photos to Facebook each day.

Over the years, it enhanced the quality of the photos displayed, too, and has recently redesigned its site to make photos more pronounced. Instagram, meanwhile, offers an easy-to-use mobile app and playful filters users can apply to snapshots of friends, quirky buildings or plates of food.

Google Plus is getting a new look just two months after Facebook spruced up its news feed — the centerpiece of its service — to feature photos more prominently and generally make posts look more like articles in a magazine or newspaper. Unlike Facebook, Google says there are no current plans to show ads on the revamped Plus.

In another change aimed at attracting more traffic, Google Plus will start to display automatic hash tags to identify the main topic being discussed in a post or featured in a photo. Google is using its understanding of semantics and photo-scanning technology to figure out what is going on. Individuals will still have an option of

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editing or forbidding a hash tag from appearing if they don't agree with Google's automatic selection. Clicking on the hashtag will take Google Plus users to other posts and pictures bearing the same marker. Similar content being shared by family and friend is supposed to show up first, thanks to the same ranking system that Google's search engine uses to pick out the most relevant results.

Facebook doesn't currently use hash tags, though there have been reports that it is working on incorporating them to its site, just as Twitter and Instagram already do.

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AP Technology Writer Barbara Ortutay contributed to this report from New York.

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