

Scaling the Social Web

Move over, MySpace. Online players from media giant Viacom to auctioneer eBay are adding networking features for their users

by [Catherine Holahan](#)

Who needs [Facebook](#)? Web users who want to find community with like-minded people no longer have to sign up with traditional social networking sites like [MySpace](#), [Friendster](#), or Facebook. They can build ties with friends and family on the sites they're using every day.

A broad array of online players, from major media companies like Viacom ([VIA](#)) to e-commerce providers such as eBay ([EBAY](#)), are adding networking features to their online destinations, letting users create detailed Web identities, connect with people over common interests, share content, and, above all, socialize. "Our audience loves to connect through shared passions, whether it is the music that they love or the causes they believe in," says Christina Norman, president of Viacom-owned MTV, which on Sept. 20 announced the creation of think.MTV.com, a network that encourages youth activism.

In some cases, such as with Yahoo's ([YHOO](#)) long-rumored "Y! Mash," which began invitation-only testing this month, and Playboy Enterprises' ([PLA](#)) newly launched PlayboyU, companies have created full-fledged MySpace competitors. Like News Corp.'s ([NWS](#)) leading social network, these sites revolve around keeping in touch with friends, making new contacts, and carving out a personalized Web space. In other cases, such as with MTV's site and StreetCred.com, a social network for hip-hop fans, the new sites are focused on developing communities around [niche content or interests](#) (BusinessWeek, 3/14/07).

FIERCE COMPETITION FOR EYEBALLS

The integration of social networking tools into all manner of Web sites is not entirely new. Sites have dabbled with features such as message boards for years. However, over the past 12 months or so, many sites have fully embraced the MySpace model, asking people to set up profiles and bring personal contacts onto their sites, as well as to view their online destinations as a place to socialize and meet new people.

In fact, there's been such overwhelming adoption of social networking features that many people are using the term "social Web," rather than Web 2.0, to refer to a generation of sites built on user-generated content and interaction. The idea is that any site worth its salt needs to enable user interaction and content-sharing. It's a concept that Yahoo, the Web's largest destination, has taken to heart, says Brad Garlinghouse, Yahoo's senior vice-president of communications and communities. "Making Yahoo more social is a critical priority.... We need to do a much better job of thinking of Yahoo as more of a social experience, not just a certain silo of Yahoo."

Behind the race to be social is a fierce competition to capture user attention. There are more than 135 million distinct sites on the Web, and the number of active sites is growing by a rate of more than 5% each month, according to Netcraft. With so many places for Web surfers to spend time, the challenge has become not just attracting large numbers of users, but keeping them there long enough that they'll see a few ads and maybe even spend some cash. In July, Web measurement

company [Nielsen/NetRatings](#) underscored the importance of this challenge by announcing that time spent, along with the number of unique users, was a [key measure of a site's popularity](#) (BusinessWeek, 7/11/07).

BUYING ON YOUR BEST FRIEND'S SAY

Using that metric, social networks MySpace and Facebook are not only among the Web's most popular, but they're also among the most valuable to advertisers. MySpace, the largest social network with 70 million-plus U.S. visitors, and Facebook, MySpace's closest U.S. competitor with 30-million-plus U.S. users, are among the top destinations, judging by time spent per user. On average, members spend more than three hours a month on those sites, according to Web measurement service comScore ([SCOR](#)). Not only that, but the same users keep coming back, to check in on pals, make new contacts, and tweak profiles to reflect changing interests, activities—even moods.

Engagement like that is paramount to marketers. Advertisers want to influence viewers to view a brand favorably or encourage users to buy a product. The more times an ad or product is shown, the better the chance that performance will improve. It also doesn't hurt if a user's social network has been similarly influenced by brand messages. "If your best friend says, 'Hey, these jeans are the best things I have ever seen,' you might just buy them," says John Squire, senior vice-president of products strategy at [Coremetrics](#), a company that measures the effectiveness of ads.

Companies looking to foster user engagement and loyalty are turning to resources like [Ning](#), a startup that helps Web publishers create social networks around their content. More than 100,000 sites have used Ning's tools to add their own networks. The sites range from a network of five family members sharing content and photos to large networks such as Playboy's site, rapper 50 Cent's Thisis50.com, and indiepublic, a social network for independent designers and artists. "We believe there is going to be a world in the not-too-distant future where there will be millions of social networks in every conceivable language for every conceivable community," says Gina Bianchini, who founded Ning with Marc Andreessen and now serves as its CEO.

MEDIA GETS INTO THE ACT

This month, news and media-sharing site [Digg](#) unleashed a host of social networking features aimed at giving more users a compelling reason to spend time on Digg's site. The tools let users set up more detailed profile pages and share stories with specified like-minded friends. More socializing tools are [on the way](#) (BusinessWeek, 9/19/07). "This enhancement of our social networking features will bring users in," says Digg CEO Jay Adelson. "Then there is another side effect, that they go and get their friends and pull them into it."

Similarly, eBay is developing a section of its site, called "neighborhoods," that functions like a social network around shopping. Neighborhoods will enable users to find others with similar interests, say in coin collecting or Boston Red Sox memorabilia, and [form communities around those hobbies](#) (BusinessWeek, 9/19/07).

Traditional print publications are also feeling the pressure. In March, Gannett's ([GCI](#)) *USA Today* began letting users set up profiles. It also added a community section and user-comment boxes beneath every story. Dow Jones' ([DJ](#)) [MarketWatch.com](#) also has launched a community feature where users can create profiles, comment on stories, and highlight their favorite articles.

A CASE OF SOCIAL NETWORK FATIGUE

But at what stage will users get fed up with all the networking? In a blog post concerning Y! Mash's launch this month, John Battelle, founder of online marketing-services company [Federated Media Publishing](#), said he has SNF—social network fatigue. "The biggest issue with any application that asks you to declare your social graph—your friends and who you are interested in knowing even if you don't know them yet—is it is a fair amount of work," says Battelle. "Plus, it asks you to

extend yourself socially and both those things can get fatiguing."

Some Digg users had a similar response to the company's launch of new social networking features. Said one user who goes by the handle "canwediggit" on Digg's messageboards: "I'm sick and [tired of social networks](#)" (BusinessWeek, 8/15/07).

Yet it's that very sense of frustration with social networks that's spurring on the newbies. A user who's had it with the requests to connect from [LinkedIn](#) or the friend invitations from fellow Facebookers may be all the more likely to retreat to a smaller, more specialized circle of fellow activists who like their MTV.

All the better if the upstart makes it easy to import a list of friends. "The easier it is to carry your social network with you and just plug it in somewhere without having to redo [all the connections], the better," Battelle says. "If I can go and plug into a vertical around politics and bring that network with me, that is going to be quite useful."

See BusinessWeek's [slide show](#) of the Best of the Web, from social networks and blogs to mashups, widgets, and a whole lot more.

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