

Facebook will not be the only game in town come 2011; be ready to take advantage of new social networks!

The infamous leak of 100 million Facebook user pages in July of 2010 caused a scare among users and created what may turn out to be a golden opportunity for potential Facebook competitors. A security researcher by the name of Ron Bowes created a script that downloaded the information that users chose to make publicly available from the Facebook User Directory. Hence, this alleged leak was actually nothing more than the collection and publication of user information already made public by 100 million Facebook users.

In addition, Facebook suffers a host of other privacy concerns including: (1) Facebook users are confused by the complex security settings and most of them were unaware of their personal data being public, (2) hackers have repeatedly defeated Facebook security to harvest user information, (3) a growing number of Facebook applications provide easy access to member data, and (4) Facebook's own connect buttons make user information readily available to other sites. The net result is that user privacy on Facebook is virtually nonexistent. With security being brought to the forefront of users' minds, it is an ideal time for a more security-conscious social network to make a grab for Facebook's massive membership. One prime candidate, although still in Alpha, is Diaspora. This new social networking site touts the not so subtle security centric slogan, "Share what you want, with whom you want." They stress user ownership of all content shared with friends. Other social networks are in the works for release in early 2011 as well, such as Google Me.

The notion that Facebook is not going to continue to be the only game in town may sound a little crazy given that their user base has exceeded 500 million. But if history proves anything, Facebook's 'monopoly' is temporary. Taking a look back at the last decade alone, there were two cases in which the public feared a company was 'taking over' the internet. In early 2000, people were panicking that AOL was taking over. The AOL and Time Warner merger further stoked these fears. However, the mega-media conglomerate faltered for a number of reasons, chief among them was a single-minded focus on mining the then lucrative Internet dial-up access business, while ignoring the growing importance of broadband Internet access. MySpace is another example: officially launched in January of 2004, it attracted over a million users within just a month. News Corp. purchased the swiftly growing social network in 2005 for a cool \$580 million. New management wasted no time in trying to monetize MySpace by inserting advertising into almost every aspect of the user experience. MySpace peaked in early 2007, with 150 million users, but due to the barrage of ads, it began a steep decline in membership that plummeted to 109 million users by mid-2010. The morale of story is that Internet titans come and go rapidly.

Why should this matter to businesses? The answer is simple. Keeping an eye on these emerging social networks enables a company to be in on the ground floor, seizing market share, and reaping profits from a growing customer base. Given the large user base Facebook has acquired, businesses should continue to market there, but remain vigilant for other valuable social media marketing opportunities in 2011. The importance of diversification in marketing efforts also holds true for social media marketing. Focusing all your marketing efforts on Facebook could prove to be a dangerous strategy in 2011.