

# SOCIAL MEDIA WHAT'S NEXT

WHERE ARE THE TOP SITES HEADED? WHAT TRENDS ARE AROUND THE CORNER? MASHABLE'S ADAM OSTROW OFFERS POINTERS FOR SUCCESS IN TOMORROW'S SOCIAL MEDIA

The rise of social media over the past few years has left several companies and platforms in a position to dictate the way in which we'll use technology in the future. Between Facebook®, MySpace™, Twitter™, LinkedIn® and YouTube, there are hundreds of millions of users across what has become known as “the social web.” There are also countless start-ups looking to either be the next huge social platform or build a business by feeding into the ecosystem that the top players have created.

Determining which of these early-stage services is going to be “the next Facebook” is an exercise in wild speculation, but we can look at what the social Web might be like in the future and how your business can position itself to succeed in it.

## CONNECTED ACCOUNTS AND PORTABLE IDENTITY

If you've spent much time on social networking sites, you've probably noticed an increasingly similar feature set. The concept driving much of this homogeneity is called “the social stream,” essentially the idea that you can log in to a site like Facebook,

Twitter or LinkedIn and see a stream of recent activities – like new status updates, photos and events – from all your connections.

While initially the stream consisted of activities taking place within a given social network, it has come to represent activities taking place around the Web. For example, you can now connect your Flickr® and YouTube accounts, and even your blog, to Facebook. This means that every time you upload a photo, share a video or write a new post through one of these mediums, it can automatically appear on the social network.

Beyond simply connecting accounts, Facebook, Twitter and MySpace now all offer their own options for logging in on third-party websites, known respectively as Facebook Connect, Sign-In With Twitter and MySpace ID. For example, you can now log in to Citysearch® using your Facebook username and password, write a review of a local business and have that automatically posted to Facebook, where it's accessible to all your connections. Similarly, many blogs and news websites will now allow you to syndicate a comment you make to Twitter.

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## HOW TO TAKE ADVANTAGE

The rise of the social stream and portable identities has a few practical implications for your business:

### **Amplifying Your Online Footprint —**

Automatically syndicating your blog posts, videos and other content to social networks raises your brand's visibility, improves traffic and creates new opportunities to connect with customers.

### **Adding New Services to Your Repertoire —**

You want to be where the people are – hence, setting up Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn accounts is top priority for your business. But

with the social stream and portable identities, a number of third-party apps that plug in to these platforms are worth consideration. From screencasts (Screenr<sup>sm</sup>) to video (TwitVid) to presentations and documents (DocStoc), there are many opportunities to improve the quality of the content you're publishing to the stream and, in turn, earn the social currency that can drive the growth of your online network.

### **Improving Your Website's Viral Growth —**

By adding social features to your website, you can get further mileage out of the content you produce and further extend your reach on social sites.

*A Few Options:*

**Sharing Buttons —**

Make sure your blog posts are easy to share by adding buttons that allow readers to quickly post them to Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and dozens of other social sites. ShareThis®, AddThis™ and AddtoAny all provide free buttons that can quickly be added to your blog. Additionally, an increasing number of businesses are adding these features to their email marketing and newsletters.

**Comment Systems —**

Portable identity is making blog comments a valuable marketing tool – not just for you as you browse the Web, but for your own blog as readers leave comments. Disqus offers a comment system that lets readers sign in with their Facebook or Twitter accounts and have their comments posted back to the social network of their choice and, in turn, be seen by all their connections. This turns blog comments into a way to generate additional traffic at no cost.

**Implementing Your Own Social Features —**

If your website offers its own login system, consider implementing portable identity solutions like Facebook Connect or Sign-In With Twitter. Citysearch online guides let users review businesses and have those reviews published to Facebook; your website could utilize these solutions for enabling product reviews, special promotions and contests, and inviting friends who might be interested in your business.

**MOBILE:  
WHERE SOCIAL MEDIA  
MEETS LOCATION**

At the same time social networks are trying to aggregate all your online activities in one place, they're also looking to extend beyond the Web and into the realm of mobile. And it's happening quickly: Facebook has more than 65 million active mobile users, Twitter sees 20 percent of tweets stream in from mobile devices, and mobile video watching on sites like YouTube is up 52 percent in 2009, according to a study published in May by Nielsen. However, there's much more going on than big social networks porting their features to

the mobile environment. The combination of advances in mobile technology, a number of innovative startups and upcoming features on services such as Twitter point to a future in which cell phones are central to the social media experience and an equally important platform for businesses.

— **Mobile Applications**

For starters, the iPhone has completely changed the landscape for mobile applications. What used to be a largely closed system is now open, and more than 85,000 mobile applications are now available on the iPhone alone. Meanwhile, virtually every other device maker, from BlackBerry® to Palm™ to Nokia, is following Apple's lead and launching its own app stores.

Fortunately, much of the groundwork has been laid for businesses small and large to play in this arena too. While initially apps cost thousands of dollars to develop, new do-it-yourself solutions like SwebApps™ allow you to set up your own iPhone apps, with templates for different types of businesses like restaurants and retail stores, and be up and running for a few hundred bucks.

— **Geo-Targeted Applications**

Another increasingly common feature on cell phones is GPS. While this has some practical applications – like the ability to find your phone if you misplace it – it also has huge potential for business. For starters, location-aware applications are emerging that allow users to share their longitude and latitude with friends.

While Twitter plans to incorporate this functionality soon, there are already applications such as Google™ Latitude and Loopt® that are location-aware. Log in and you can see where all your friends are and quickly make impromptu plans at nearby locations. The business model here should be fairly obvious: the ability to serve hyperlocal advertising to potential customers that are within a few feet of your business.

This is already starting to happen. Foursquare, a location-aware app that lets users “check in” at venues in a number of metro areas, recently launched a partnership with a company called 8coupons. Through the deal, users of Foursquare in New York City

were alerted to coupons within a three-block radius of their current location.

Meanwhile, we're also seeing ad networks develop around the concept of location-aware advertising. AdMob, one of the leading mobile ad networks, recently recorded its 100 billionth ad impression. Like other applications, AdMob lets you target ads based on user whereabouts, but it does so across hundreds of mobile applications and websites, giving advertisers the scale that is currently missing from individual apps.

**SOCIAL SEARCH:  
BRINGING THE WHOLE  
THING TOGETHER**

If you've experimented at all with online marketing, chances are it has been in the realm of search, where the bulk of online advertising dollars still go and where improving rankings in the organic results through SEO (search engine optimization) is a full-time job for thousands of specialists. However, like so many other aspects of the Web, search is about to get infused with a big dose of social.

Both Facebook and Twitter have already provided a small glimpse of the road ahead in search. Twitter's advanced search options let you combine a keyword query for tweets with other social modifiers – like location, if it came from a specific user, and even if it had a positive or negative attitude. Meanwhile, Facebook's recently revealed search tools let you search within your

network or site-wide for status updates, links and notes about a given topic.

However, social search is only in its infancy. In the long run, we're likely headed in a direction where, in much the same way that organic search results in Google are based on page rank, social search results are based on algorithms that look at a user's social authority – how many connections he has, how positively he's viewed by others and the quality of the content he's producing on the social web. Further, Web and social search are likely to become one and the same, where results are simply a combination of link patterns, keyword analysis and social media metrics.

So how does your business position itself to succeed in this future online world dictated largely by our capital on social media sites? It may sound clichéd, but looking at the current landscape, the key seems to be to work smarter, not harder. Improve your position in the social stream by connecting accounts. Turn website visitors into marketers by enabling portable identity features. Extend your business to the mobile world with a branded application.

Actively participating on social media sites remains paramount, but that will go only so far as you have hours in the day to commit. Getting ahead of future trends with simple and accessible technology will add significant scale to your marketing strategy and give you a competitive edge as we continue to move toward an ever more social web.

**CONSUMERS SIGNAL THEIR APPROVAL —**

Marketers may be adopting social media in droves, but are consumers reciprocating by following companies and brands on social media sites? According to recent data, the answer would seem to be a resounding “yes.” In a study provided to eMarketer™ by Anderson Analytics, more than half of social networking users have become a fan or follower of a brand online. Moreover, users are far more likely to say something positive about a brand than something negative.

*“52% of social network users had become a fan or follower of a company or brand, while 46% had said something good about a brand or company on a social networking website – double the percentage who had said something negative (23%).”*

*(Source: Anderson Analytics “Social Networking Service,” provided to eMarketer July 13, 2009)*

In other words, there seems to be much more going on beyond businesses simply setting up shop on social media sites and hoping people will show up. Rather, users are actively seeking out their favorite brands online or being connected through other means – like a friend's suggestion, a link on a website or offline advertising. All the more reason that spending on the medium is expected to continue to increase over the next five years.