



Web Experience Excellence:

Driving Profitability...From Customer Acquisition to Advocacy

A 3-Part Series by Frost & Sullivan, the Growth Partnership Company

The Social Corporation

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*"I'm working from home today."
"I'm on Malibu Beach for the next four days."
"Hmm ... Swine Flu, does that mean pigs can really fly?"*

Look familiar? These are Facebook status updates — messages about a user's mood, location and other musings that seem to change every five minutes. The amount of time some people spend constantly updating their status messages makes me wonder what they are getting out of it. Why do people use Facebook so regularly? What draws them to it? What keeps them there and what prompts them share?

These questions are leftover from my knowledge management days when it seemed that one of the biggest challenges organizations had was getting people to share their knowledge with each other. So how is Facebook different? For starters, users are comfortable sharing on Facebook because they are sharing with "friends," a select, approved group of people, and having that sense of security gives them the freedom to express themselves without judgment.

At its most basic level, Facebook is a social networking site, which means it allows you to find and link to other people who are registered on it. The tool facilitates communication between two people, a group of people, or a whole network of people, depending on how you define your circle of friends. The concept of social networking has been around since the 1970s but exploded in popularity in the early 2000s when college students started using MySpace to communicate with each other.

When we talk about social networking, it's more than just the peer-to-peer or peer-to-community communications applications like MySpace and Facebook. Social networking also consists of tools such as Wikis, blogs, social bookmarking, agile project management and virtual and shared applications. The focus of these tools is on more than connecting and communicating; the focus is on gathering, sharing, organizing and validating specific data and, most importantly, providing context so that the data can be understood by the people who shared it *and* by others who will access it in the future.

Wikis are Web pages that allow collective posting, modifications, commenting or creation of content. Because everyone in the group typically has the same rights, they are often self-policing, meaning if someone posts something incorrect, one of the group members can change it. Edits are maintained so the group knows the history of what was changed. Wikis can be a very powerful tool because they help maintain institutional memory.

On the other hand, blogs communicate using a one-to-many relationship model. Blogs fundamentally operate on the same premise as online bulletin boards or forums where someone posts a thought, question or other type of entry that prompts various responses from those who read it. Within organizations, blogs have been used effectively for customer focus groups, project management and by executives to gain visibility in the marketplace.

Social bookmarking refers to tools that allow users to organize Web site bookmarks using metadata and share those bookmarks with other people in a group or community. Links can be kept private or public and shared with one person, a group, a network or a community.

Typically, consumer services don't always flow into enterprise-level services because what works at a consumer level may not work at an enterprise level. So why are companies so interested in social networking? The answer: *communication*. The simple act of communicating often seems to be one of the most difficult things to master within organizations. The power of social networking and its success at a consumer level has made it extremely desirable at an organizational level.

Sun Microsystems, one of Xpediant's long-term customers, is a good example of how to effectively use social networking in the workplace. Sun's CEO, Jonathan Schwartz, has an executive blog, blogs.sun.com/ionathan, which allows him to stay in touch with his marketplace. Internally, Sun employees use wikis and blogs extensively to communicate with one another and share and gather institutional knowledge. Another example that I read about recently is PfizerPedia. Everyone collectively stores, shares and edits the information on Pfizer's corporate wiki. Pfizer also uses social bookmarks to categorize and store Web links that are available internally, and the company uses Sharepoint sites to create profiles that allow employees to link to one another, similar to Facebook.



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The nature of social networking, the free access and the openness to the community, made it initially suitable for open source software. Some of the early vendors in the marketplace were companies like Drupal, Jive, Scuttle, Socialtext and Telligent. More established vendors, especially those in the content management and portal space, have been building a tool base to support social networking enterprises for their customers.

Vignette, for instance, offers a host of enterprise-level social media solutions that allow users to not only tag and rate content, but to create blogs and wikis, integrate rich media and video content and create social microsites or even communities within an existing Web site. Vignette's Employee Interaction Hub is just one example of a solution that creates an enterprise-class collaboration environment that looks and feels more like a social networking site, such as Facebook or MySpace. Solutions like this bridge the gap between how we interact with others in our personal lives and our professional lives. These solutions takes the best of both worlds — the information our company provides so we can do our jobs, and the wisdom of our peers and co-workers — and augment the original content with their own.

The one question that's always asked whenever any new initiative is implemented at an organizational level is: "What is the ROI?" Like its predecessor, knowledge management and communities of practice or communities of interest, the answer is still: "It's difficult to quantify." However, there are some base-level metrics that can be gathered to make a business case for enterprise-wide social networking, including: How many people have registered? How many documents have been shared? Has the e-mail volume decreased? Has the use of disk space become more efficient? Do we have better relationships with our customers? Has it enabled more idea sharing?

Organizations need to realize that how people work has changed; working through social networks is not a phase. It will morph into a more powerful way of working and communicating — not just within organizations, but also with customers and the world marketplace. Organizations that have realized this and taken the plunge by supporting and embracing this change have taken the first steps in getting their organizational processes ready for the incoming generation.

Headquartered in Houston, Texas, Xpediant Solutions is a leading provider of innovative, comprehensive, Web-based solutions to Global 2000 companies as well as small businesses in the U.S. A small company with a big "footprint," Xpediant is known for its innovative problem solving, aggressive timelines for delivery, affordable solutions and total customer satisfaction. For more information, visit www.XpediantSolutions.com.