

Face to Facebook

EVERYONE YOU KNOW IS POSTING PHOTOS ON FLICKR, POKING FRIENDS ON FACEBOOK AND MAKING CONNECTIONS ON LINKEDIN. IT'S A VERY REVEALING WORLD OUT THERE BUT **JODIE SANGSTER** ASKS, ARE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES A MARKETER'S DREAM OR A PRIVACY NIGHTMARE?



The buzz around social networking sites could power a small country for a year. Some are hailing them as the newest, most exciting form of direct marketing while others consider them the latest privacy nightmare.

Many of us use sites like Facebook and MySpace to keep in closer contact, reconnect with lost friends or even make new ones. But who among us considers the implications of posting so much personal information in the public domain? Who thinks about the implicit agreements we have entered into upon joining social networking sites, and how the site owner will utilise the personal information that we post?

Over the last 12 months, the technology media has chronicled the difficulties encountered by social networking sites that use personal data belonging to users. These include both legal battles and the negative publicity that erupts each time personal information is used by a site in a way the user did not expect.

Most social networking sites do state in their terms and conditions that the information provided to the site owner through the registration process and the information posted within the site will be used to “provide a more personalised experience” or “send notifications of new services”. The question is whether it is realistic to expect the average consumer to read a ten page privacy policy to determine whether their data will be used for unexpected.

And if that average consumer did read the privacy policy, what is the chance that they would agree, if given a genuine choice, to the site owner collecting further information about them from additional sources, such as newspapers, blogs, instant messaging services and other site users for the purposes of providing “more useful information”?

That being said, it is an undeniable fact that social networking sites have given the commercial world access to a completely new form of targeted marketing. No other

medium has allowed brand names to publicise themselves to such a degree.

Facebook's Beacon, despite PR complications, had the potential to be a marketer's dream. When a consumer purchased a product elsewhere on the internet, the vendor was offered the opportunity to communicate details of the purchase back through to Facebook. Facebook could then tell the consumer's network of ‘friends’ about the item just bought.

In theory, this is a sound idea—after all, is there any better form of marketing than a personal recommendation from a friend? But as UK publication *The Register* pointed out, “people don't mind telling friends they have gone to see Led Zeppelin but they don't necessarily want them to see they have just bought a blow up doll”.

Although this type of advertising is legal, providing the social networking site has adequately disclosed its practices and obtained the requisite consent from the user, the Beacon example shows what happens when commercial organisations push beyond consumer expectations.

As a consumer research study conducted by the ADMA in 2005 showed, consumers

Social networking sites are a new form of direct marketing...



do not mind their information being utilised for direct marketing purposes, providing that they are both informed of this and provided with an opportunity to opt out. It also appears that this is dependent upon a genuine disclosure and opt-out opportunity being given—something hidden in the privacy policy or terms and conditions is simply unacceptable.

The moral of the story seems to be that the legality of a practice does not make it widely acceptable. Social networking sites are a new form of direct marketing and it appears that they are here to stay. As long as the communication between consumers and marketers is open and honest, everyone can sleep easy tonight. **⊙**

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