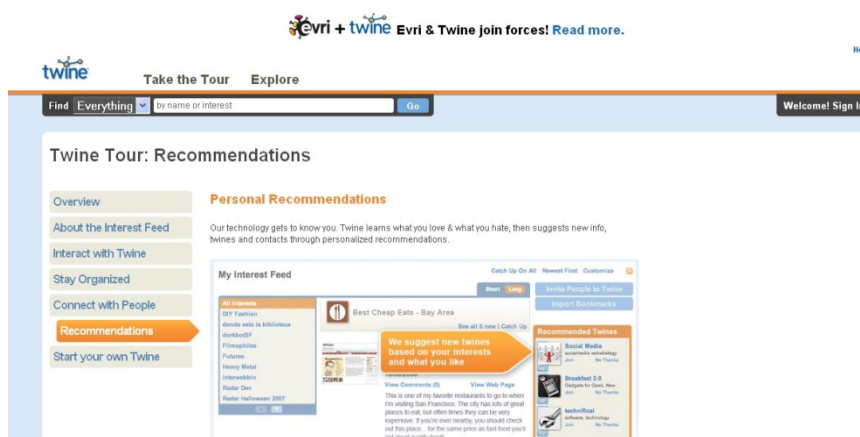


Online Social Networking – the next stages as seen from 2010

A few years ago I wrote about the future of Social Networking. As always, the moving fingers writes and having written, moves on. Technology advances, people learn from their experience. Online social networks are now ubiquitous, and in fact, so much so, that few provide a really satisfactory experience. There are several factors which inhibit the genuinely widespread use of them – the vast majority of members are at most, “light” users. These are:



- Too difficult and complicated to use and get value
- Little or no positive feedback
- Lack of common values among members

Technology does exist to address these issues.

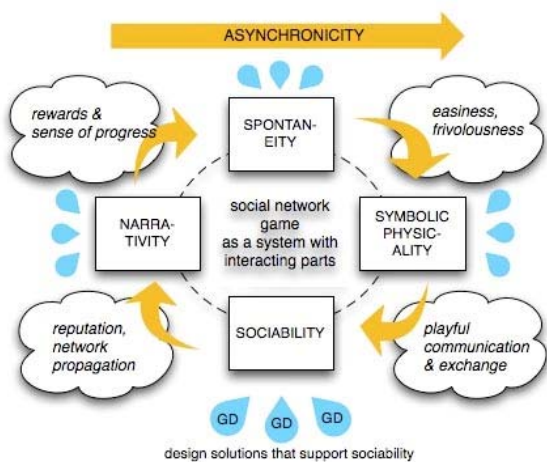
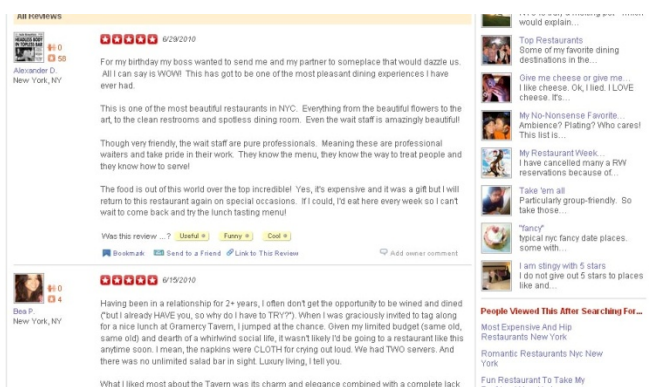
Twine (now Evry) does

use a recommendation engine and your preferences to bring content you might find interesting to you, but the social network itself is rather pointless, with little incentive to use it regularly. So even with the technology in place, the developers of the networks have to apply thought to ensure that members actually have a reason to use it. Yelp does a better job of engaging members, though it has been slower to catch on as it has moved beyond its California origins. By inviting members to recommend local businesses, such as restaurants, and stores, it provides a reason for members to go back to it again and again. Yelp uses members' reviews, which people do like. More importantly, it allows members to show something of themselves, which allows for a personal touch, and allows connections to be made.

There are now thousands of online social networks, many created using Ning or Google. They range from those with a few hundred members to those with many millions. Yet, again and again, we see that having joined, most people lose interest quickly because they get no immediate positive reinforcement and find it too difficult or confusing to fully participate. The majority of Twitter members never or rarely tweet. Most Facebook and LinkedIn members do not use the network. Perhaps the newer geotagging based networks such as Foursquare or Loopt will get wider active usage, but past experience tells us otherwise.

It will become increasingly important for social networks to provide an easier and more rewarding experience to all who join. When the purpose of the network becomes all too clearly to exploit the members to make profit, it loses trust and limits its growth. Yet, day after day, there are more and more “me too” networks whose creators and investors expect rapid success.

Let’s look at how the most successful traditional (not online) networks have worked. They benefited from personal interaction and people who guided newcomers, make and ensured that others made introductions which were mutually appropriate and helpful. Because there was deep personal interaction, trust was established and maintained to that when you met a member of the network you felt you could trust them immediately, do business with them, recommend them and accept their advice. Of course, from time to time, a member of the group would exploit the situation, but in most cases the group was so tight that retribution could be visited up the offender’s head. With an online network this is far more difficult so we have to find alternative and software enabled ways. For example, we can ask members to rate others and provide them with a reputation. In addition to eBay, Yelp allows members to rate other user provided content, as does Amazon. We can use profiles (on a simplistic sense) or behavior to match people on a custom way. This makes a social network more like eHarmony or Chemistry.com. We can use geo-tagging as Foursquare and Loopt do, but for many people this can be rather nerve-racking.



While there is the logical and unemotional value of a social network, we have to recognize that there are many emotional intangibles which contribute to the success of the network. For example, there is the value of “exhaust data.” This is apparently useless and irrelevant posts and messages, such as “I like cheese.” While apparently valueless, it performs a function. It affirms that I count, I am alive, and I am active. This is known as phatic data. It is also critical that the network achieves

involvement by providing not only coaching and guidance, but also feedback.

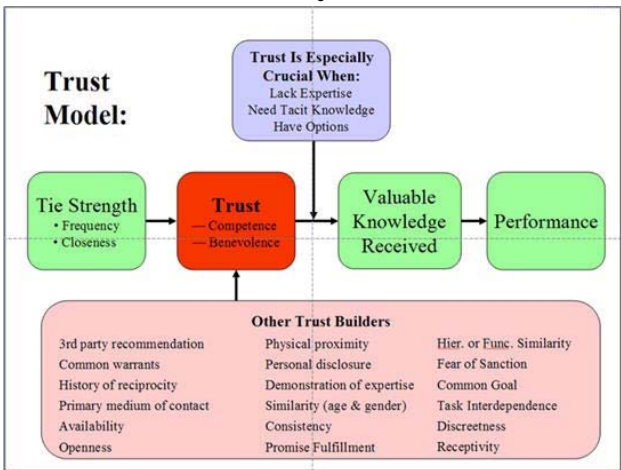
The next generation of online networks will make far greater use of types of artificial intelligence to understand the members and gently encourage them to connect to more new people and to have greater contacts with existing ones. They will probably use technology to do this more effectively. The goal is to move beyond the Dunbar number and provide value, both quantitatively and in quality of relationship, with others. So whether we are talking purely social sites, career sites, shared interest sites, or dating



"I didn't know the 'old boys' network had a website."

sites, there will be a transformation in their processes and technologies over the next few years. Essentially, we are looking to technology to replicate, and even strengthen the characteristics which the old fashioned face to face networks used so effectively to support their members.

The biggest issue that social networks may face in being truly successful may be one of the oldest. Human nature is frequently a barrier to complete success. People, sometimes with good reason, are reluctant to trust those whom they do not know, and most are more concerned with what they can get from a relationship than what they can give. While there are attempts to build in devices so that members can decide whether to trust someone, with eBay being a leader, these are not perfect, and there is as yet no way to measure and "reward" altruism. While a reputation engine may be one way to recognize altruism, it may simply encourage takers to exploit the generous. So, the problem is a long way from being solved. I do believe that ultimately, the tools we use for behavioral targeting and Netflix uses to make recommendations will also be used to determine who are trustworthy and who are willing to help others.



Technology will continue to advance, but understanding of human behavior will need to move forward too. We have to know how and why people do what they do so that we can build systems to facilitate larger and stronger networks which go well beyond merely "collecting" connections much like we used to collect stamps or baseball cards, most of which turn out to be valueless in later life.