

Social networking making mobile push

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Gina Reno's friends don't expect much eye contact from her when they get together. More often than not, she'll be staring at her cell phone, tapping away feverishly with calloused hands, communicating with people she's never once met in person.

"My friends would get so mad at me because I'm constantly with my phone in my hand," the lifelong Chicagoan said of her tendency to log in to a service called Hookt on her Boost Mobile handset whenever she's got a free moment. Fortunately, Reno added, her pals "have gotten used to it. They say, 'Ah, let her alone. Just leave her alone in a corner with a phone.'"

Now, if only her employer was so understanding: "I get in trouble at work all the time. My boss has to yell at me to put it away," said Reno, 36, a sales representative for a magazine subscription marketing company.

If the sudden, immense popularity of MySpace and other social networking sites on the Web still strikes some as bizarre, the technology industry is clearly bent on extending that puzzling phenomenon to the cell phone as a ripe new revenue opportunity.

Mobile manifestations of social networking are springing up as both a cellular extension of existing web sites and communities that exist only on mobile devices. Complicating the discussion is that there's no strong agreement as to what exactly mobile social networking is or should be.

Some of the more basic offerings revolve largely around joining chat rooms and searching for new friends to communicate with by text message. There's also a growing focus on mobile blogging and uploading the photos and videos that users capture with the increasingly high-end digital cameras built into their cell phones.

The concept of mobile social networking isn't entirely new. Hookt, for example, has its origins in a mobile service launched five years ago by AirG Inc. of Canada. It's grown into an international community of 10 million users who access it through 85 different cell companies under assorted brands.

Still, the real momentum and industry hype didn't start building until mid-2006. It was around that time that MySpace, a unit of News Corp., launched a mobile portal to its gigantic online community through Helio, a wireless service geared toward a younger crowd that's willing to spend more than the typical cell user.

More recently, AT&T Inc.'s Cingular Wireless began offering MySpace Mobile for \$2.99 per month plus data usage charges. Facebook, meanwhile, has partnered with both Virgin Mobile USA, owned jointly by Sprint Nextel and Virgin Mobile Holdings PLC, and Amp'd Mobile Inc., whose backers include Qualcomm Inc. and Viacom Inc.

But beyond the scramble to team with the two best-known social networking services, cellular carriers also are looking to offer their customers alternatives. Both Sprint and Virgin Mobile have signed deals to launch a new application from Inter casting Corp. that's designed to provide a wide selection of communities on a single menu while making these desktop-friendlier services easier to navigate on a

handset. So far, Inter casting has cut deals for its Anthem platform to feature Black Planet, Asian Avenue, MiGente, LiveJournal and Xanga, though it's up to each cell carrier to reach agreements with the specific services to be offered on its cell phones.

User statistics are hard to come by so early in the game, particularly since there's no clear definition of where to draw the line: Does mobile social networking include simple chat, messaging and blogging communities, or does there have to be some multimedia flare to the interaction?

In December, ABI Research estimated there are now nearly 50 million users of mobile social communities worldwide.

Helio won't disclose how many customers it has signed up since its May 2006 launch, but says 75 percent of them have used the MySpace service, which is included in Helio's pricey monthly plans.

One of them is Bree Michael Warner, a 30-year-old actress and photographer in Los Angeles who was already a fervent MySpace member on the Internet -- using it to promote her work and as an industry networking tool -- when she switched to Helio with MySpace in mind. Armed with her new phone and its camera, Warner has become an even more active MySpace user now that she needn't be sitting at a computer to log in.

When hired recently to photograph a concert in Anaheim by a band called Waxapples, Warner took some shots backstage with her phone and then uploaded them to MySpace with a blog entry.

"I'm constantly updating my page with stuff I'm shooting, uploading video so people can see clips, posting bulletins that maybe I just updated my page or I'm at this event," said Warner, who has more than 4,000 MySpace "friends" who receive those alerts. In general, she checks her MySpace account for new messages hourly.

"It becomes quite addicting. If I'm driving and I'm in traffic and I get bored, what do I do? I go online," said Warner, whose monthly Helio bill of \$125 is more than twice as large as the average cell user's.

Numbers like those help explain why wireless companies are so intrigued by mobile social networking. Beyond text messaging and the surprise multibillion dollar business generated by musical ring tones, carriers have struggled to find another big moneymaker to offset their declining revenues from phone calls. Mobile video and music downloads have begun to build a following, but only slowly. Social networking, with its proven allure as a fun way to kill time, may bring a speedier payoff.

Boost charges 50 cents per day to use Hookt, and Reno says she logs in almost daily, which means she often spends an extra \$10 or \$15 a month on her phone bill.

But with MySpace and so many new entrants crowding the market, it's unclear how many will succeed.

"Mobile is hot, social networking is hot, so the combination of the two has led to creation of at least 30 companies in the last year and a half," said Frederick Ghahramani, co-founder of AirG. Asked if there's room for that many to prosper, Ghahramani said, "Obviously not." Yet while all the new competition poses a challenge, he said, the growing buzz means "people are becoming more aware of these mobile services."