

Despite the smartphone revolution, AirG still going strong on the feature phone

by Kevin Fitchard

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Smartphones brought with them direct access and integration to some of the world's biggest social networking brands, from Facebook to Twitter, while opening the door to new mobile Internet powerhouses like Foursquare. But despite the smartphone revolution, one of the original mobile networking sites, airG, is still thriving, offering its simple versions of chat, photo sharing and forums to what is still primarily a feature phone user base.

Though airG is up against sophisticated smartphones apps that integrate with the phone's user interface, messaging client and location-based services, it isn't showing signs of being displaced. In 2010 its user base grew by 40% to 55 million cumulative unique users, 80% of which are in the U.S. airG runs in the mobile browser, offering Web-based chat services, online dating tools, and forums as well as basic news feeds. airG has also followed other social networks by offering up awards and badges for participation, allowing members to exchange virtual gifts and hosting simple games played through the browser.

According to airG, in 2010 its members shared more than 2.3 billion photos, exchanged 74 million virtual gifts and ate up 7.9 billion minutes of airtime. The average user, according to the company, spent 77 minutes online each day using the social network's features.

AirG's growth builds on the fact that majority of data-enabled mobile devices are still feature phones. Smartphone uptake is increasing rapidly, but AirG co-founder Vince Yen pointed out that mobile subscriptions are growing across all classes of device not just smartphones.

AirG still has plenty of room to grow in its traditional feature phone segments, though it's not writing off smartphones completely. "As Smartphones become the de facto channel to access the internet we are seeing a steady increase in the number of smartphones being used to access airG," Yen said via e-mail.