

Success of MySpace fuels social networking

Numerous Web sites looking to satisfy demand to keep connected

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STAYING IN TOUCH

One firm likens its service to “MySpace on a cell phone.” Others cast themselves as MySpace for seniors or MySpace for car enthusiasts or better-than-MySpace because it has 3D imagery.

Exactly how much MySpace-ization can the planet take?

Among the offerings in the growing field are:

AIRG

This Vancouver-based firm offers social networking by cell phone, for people not sitting at a computer all day and instead use their phones as their main device to stay connected.

“You can chat, instant message, share blogs and photos, create profiles, all on a mobile phone,” says founder Fred Ghahramani.

Users are billed through their mobile service provider — participating carriers worldwide include Sprint Nextel, Cingular, Orange and Virgin Mobile — and AirG has 10 million users in more than 30 countries. It usually costs a few dollars a month. A recent poll found that 59 percent of users don’t have regular access to a personal computer.

THERE.COM

At the Web site There.com, users create cartoon-like images or “avatars” of themselves, choosing everything from hair color to wardrobe to bust-line, then enter fully illustrated chat rooms in which their typed messages come out as word bubbles over their character.

There.com, based in Laguna Beach, Calif., launched three years ago and has 450,000 members, he says. Membership is free and the site is not yet making a profit.

It’s a safe, PG-13 world, Wilson adds. The site screens all content — such as clothes and virtual neighborhoods — to ensure there is nothing obscene or in violation of copyrights.

COMMUNITY CONNECT

Community Connect, which runs a trio of minority-themed social networking sites, actually is older than MySpace.

It launched in 1997 and features BlackPlanet.com, an online community for blacks; MiGente.com, which targets English-speaking Latinos; and AsianAvenue.com for the Asian community.

In addition to social networking, the sites also feature job listings from employers seeking to expand diversity — for which the employers pay to post.

Most services are free to users, though the dating feature has a base price of \$19.95 a month.

<http://www.thestate.com/mld/thestate/business/15311238.htm>