

TECH

Social networks get mobilised

Louisa Hearn
August 21, 2006

The social networking movement looks set to explode onto the mobile platform with a new generation of location, blog and chat-based services promising to untether the connected generation from their computers.

Big names like Google and MySpace are all vying for a stake in the emerging space as mobile carriers scurry to package up live chat and picture sharing services into subscription packages for customers.

But while initiatives in the US, Japan and Switzerland are flying thick and fast, Australia's slow entry into the third-generation mobile market, and the prohibitive cost of mobile data downloads has meant that comparable services here remain thin on the ground, said Ross Dawson, the chairman of technology consultancy, Future Exploration Network.

Although the mobile phone offers an "extremely appropriate platform for social networks," he said current pricing structures were holding back the market.

"The fundamental problem is in the way Australian mobile companies set up charges for data downloads compared with the US where most plans are based on on unlimited data downloads. This means people are far less likely to experiment with data transfers of multimedia based content," he said.

Added to this is the relatively small penetration of mobiles with internet browser capabilities, meaning many social-based mobile services in Australia are limited to text services which run as an adjunct to existing internet services such as online dating.

But despite the limited marketplace, a new generation of services that combine chat and picture messaging is forming a fledgling mobile social movement here.

Hutchison's 3 service was first to enter the 3G market in Australia and it also hopes to lead the social networking charge here with its subscription-based social networking service, Kink Kommunity.

Created by Perth-based company, Loop Wireless, the community allows subscribers to post up their photos, interact with other members, and comment on other postings within a fully moderated environment for a fixed monthly rate.

In spite of its name and the fact that Loop Wireless is now owned by Adultshop, Ian Rodwell, chief executive, maintains the service is not oriented towards adult-only content.

"This is a corporate play between Loop and Adult shop. For Adultshop it represents a deliberate attempt to go down the non-adult path and the company was also keen on a lot of other things Loop was doing in terms of sport and music content," he said.

Based on its take-up by 3 subscribers here over the last year, the service has now been expanded to 3 customers in the UK, and plans are afoot to introduce the service to other countries, linking up the community on a global basis, Mr Rodwell said.

Optus last month also rolled out some new community offerings to its Australian subscribers on the Optus Zoo portal via a tie up with AirG of Canada. Subscribers on the 3G network can now share picture profiles and conduct public and private messaging in a range of international chat rooms with 7.5 million community members.

Although Vodafone Australia abandoned early attempts to offer live chat services owing to concerns over moderation of content, the mobile operator concedes that with mobile penetration in Australia fast outstripping that of broadband, the adoption of social networking services is inevitable.

Company spokesman, Greg Spears, said Vodafone was now looking at replicating services for the mobile environment that have become popular on the internet.

"There are a lot of people out there with mobile phones and the sophistication of these devices is improving by the day," he said.

But it is not only the mobile phone operators driving this movement. Yahoo and MSN have been busy making their instant messaging applications mobile friendly, and last year Google acquired Dodgeball, a US mobile service that allows people to locate and meet up with networks of friends via text messaging services.

Social networking giant, MySpace has also been exploring the terrain and now offers a limited text-based service with US mobile giant, Cingular Wireless to accompany its online presence. A US Wireless startup called Helio has also built a range of handsets that come preloaded with MySpace features.

But none of these more established players can afford to sit still as new services that blend sophisticated multimedia and location-based services with social networking begin to make a mark in the US.

New entrant, Meetro allows people to find and meet up with people located nearby, by combining instant messaging, social networks and location based data.

Another new service called Rabble, combines mobile blogging with location data so subscribers in the area can check out restaurant or music reviews, and other any relevant content posted up in the form of user generated photos and video.

In Japan, a company called ImaHima has also broken new ground, with technology that can locate where friends are at any given time for those looking to meet up. According to Mr Dawson, the service has been widely adopted in Japan, and could also prove a hit in the local market.

"People are currently using text for this purpose, which is pretty clunky. There would be immense value in having an easy mobile interface to see where a defined group of people is located, using instant messaging or chat. The latent demand is there, but it is up to Australian telecommunications companies to come up with a useful product at reasonable price," Mr Dawson said.