

Facebook Unveils New Site Design amid Growth Surge

April 12 2007

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Facebook, which has enjoyed explosive growth relative to rival social networking sites since a membership crisis six months ago, is set to unveil new features on Wednesday that mark its progress from a dating site for college kids into a mainstream network tool.

The Palo Alto-based site founded three years ago by then Harvard undergraduate Mark Zuckerberg, 22, has been quietly introducing new features by soliciting feedback from tens of thousands of users, seeking to avoid abrupt product releases.

Facebook, the No. 2 U.S. social network after News Corp.'s MySpace, met with a sudden privacy backlash from its users last September after introducing a design that revealed more personal information about users than many wanted known.

But after a rapid response to online protests that involved hundreds of thousands of its members, Facebook subsequently saw its growth explode to 18 million active users from around 7.5 million active users before the membership crisis.

On Wednesday, Facebook is introducing new features designed to simplify how users navigate through individual member profiles to keep tabs on friends and associates. It will offer so-called portal pages that

give users a bird's eye view of groups they belong to and of possible groups they might join.

"You can only see the networks you are in and the networks you would be able to join," Zuckerberg, Facebook's chief executive, said in a phone interview.

Facebook counts more than 19 million registered users across 47,000 regional, work-related, college or high-school networks. The site's popularity is tied to the control users have over what other members see, which discourages members from cloaking their identify in the anonymity of many sites, so much so that many members post their mobile phone numbers.

Seeking to avert any new surprises for its members, Facebook has invited more than 100,000 users to comment on the site's redesigned features over the past several weeks.

The feedback led Facebook to make changes to the final product, including giving users the ability to control if an event or group is publicized on the community portal pages that connect together member profiles in any Facebook sub-network.

"A lot of the changes are very subtle. We make small changes instead of huge things," said a chastened Zuckerberg.

Office workers and other older users have been allowed to join Facebook networks, not just college or high school students tied to particular schools or universities. More than 50 percent of users are outside of college, Zuckerberg said of the change.

Data from measurement firm comScore Networks confirms that Facebook's growth has surged since its stumble in September. Visitors to

Facebook have jumped 75 percent since then to 24.8 million worldwide in February. Off a far larger base, MySpace grew 26 percent to 98.5 million visitors in the same period.

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