

Does Facebook share too much information?

February 9 2009, By Sarah Aarthun

It's possible that you don't care whether your old college roommate thinks Ric Flair's birthday should be a national holiday. Maybe the fact that a co-worker adores a particular brand of potato chips does nothing for you.

And did you really need to know your cousin is lactose intolerant?

Yet in recent weeks, personal information ranging from the arcane to the surprisingly revealing has spread furiously across Facebook via a simple application many of us have come to know as the "25 Random Things" note.

The premise is simple: Users write 25 random things about themselves. When they're done, they send the list to 25 of their friends and encourage them all to continue the chain.

But it's not that different from chain letters, or from those pesky e-mails people forward to their friends, asking them to forward it to still more.

So why does everyone seem to be doing it?

"A lot of people I know were doing the survey and every time I read it, I learned something new about them, (whether it be) my younger brother, neighbor or friend from across campus," said Robb Young, a 24-year-old student at Appalachian State.

Ruth Mattern, 56, of Wilson, N.C., had a similar experience.

"I learned so much about my friends when I read their lists that I thought it would be nice to tell them a bit about myself, too," said Mattern, who works as a shipping coordinator for Bridgestone Tire. "Seeing things on their list that can also describe me made me realize ... why we're friends."

John McArthur, an assistant professor in communications at Queens University of Charlotte, N.C., says that opportunity to connect with friends is what is helping drive the list's popularity.

"I think the Internet gives us a superficial way to know other people," says McArthur, who specializes in digital media. "Doing things like this 25 Things note allows us to go a little bit deeper, because we do search for a deeper relationship interpersonally."

But others were most surprised by how much they learned about themselves. Marsha Ellison's note took just 15 minutes to compose, but she says a lifetime of learning was her inspiration.

"It made me realize who and what are really important to me, to my life, and what I need to remember about myself and who I really am," said Ellison, of Charlotte. "Sometimes we forget the experiences and people who have shaped who we are. ... In this age of electronic gadgets and noise, how many people manage to sit in the quiet and explore their thoughts?"

Facebook spokesman Matt Hicks says the social networking site isn't sure how or when the "25 Things" note started, but says the number of users receiving notes has increased by more than five times in the past week. Facebook has more than 150 million active users.

Despite its popularity, not every Facebook user is eagerly sitting down to share their innermost (or mundane, in some cases) secrets with their

friends. More than 40 Facebook groups had been created as of Tuesday for people who are refusing to participate. Among the groups' pleas for others to join them:

"Tired of being tagged in 25 random things over and over again, wasting valuable time reading about your friends' unusual habits that would better be left unknown? Make a stand and show your support against this phenomenon sweeping all of Facebook."

"Hey, you're a great person, and I'm glad we're friends, but the fact that you love to eat Chinese food with your left hand in San Diego during August just isn't that high up on my 'things I really need to know' list."

"Join us as we protest mindless repetition and conformation to the mass mailing ways of our society!"

As a result, some have been holding back because they don't want to make themselves a target for ridicule.

"It takes time to do a good list and the more of these you read that show some really creative answers, you don't want to put up a lame one," said Kirk Grosch, 55, a community manager in Charlotte. "Fear of failure, I guess."

FROM CHAIN LETTERS TO '25 THINGS'

A look at how communication chains have evolved, from a snail-mail note to viral video and "25 Things."

The first documented chain letter was mailed in 1888. As of September 2008, at least five chain letters were actively circulating the U.S. Postal System, according to "Chain Letter Evolution" by Daniel VanArsdale.

In the 90s, e-mail took over as the method of choice. In "the Neiman Marcus cookie recipe," a person tells of being ripped off for more than \$200 for a recipe. The e-mail claims the person is passing the recipe out for free to get her revenge.

A 3D-rendered dancing baby became a pop culture icon in the '90s after being distributed widely over the Internet and making cameos on the hit show "Ally McBeal." Think of it as an early viral video star.

"LOLcats," images of cats combined with a funny caption written in slang, began circulating the Internet in early 2005. Entire Web sites (most popular: www.icanhascheezburger.com) are now devoted to the images.

21-year-old Chris Crocker was living in obscurity in Tennessee until 2007 when he decided to post a video to YouTube demanding that critics "leave Britney alone," referring to troubled pop star Britney Spears. The video became viral e-mail and landed Crocker on CNN, Howard Stern and ABC, among others.

According to Facebook, use of the "Notes" application, where users forward "25 Things," has more than doubled in recent weeks.

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