

Facebook courting Twitter lovers

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Facebook logo

Facebook is courting Twitter lovers with pages that fire instant updates to limitless audiences in a fashion echoing the essence of the hot micro-blogging service.

The new feature debuts as Facebook prepares to begin rolling out on March 11 revamped home pages that emphasize fresh news from friends that users most want to stay in tune with.

Facebook still limits to 5,000 the number of friends that users can link to personal profiles, but has removed the cap from public pages tailored for celebrities, politicians and others with messages for the masses.

"It looks like Facebook is going down the Twitter path and craving a Twitter-like experience," said analyst Rob Enderle of Enderle Group in Silicon Valley.

"Facebook wants to be that uber-portal where you go and do most of your stuff online. It's a very Microsoft-like approach to the market. If

you can own and control the customer you can milk them for revenue in various ways."

Profiles and pages at Facebook are free, but more people spending more time at the website can be parlayed into online advertising dollars.

As of Friday, approximately 203,000 Facebook members had installed a Twitter application that lets them link the micro-blogging service to social-networking profiles, according to the website.

While Facebook has yet to turn a profit, it reportedly tried to buy Twitter last year in a 500-million-dollar stock deal that fell through because of disagreement about what shares of privately-owned Facebook were actually worth.

"I think this is a result of them not being able to buy Twitter," Enderle said of Facebook's latest changes. "If you can't buy something, make something similar and move the sector over."

Twitter has a devoted following, but there is allure to tending to micro-blogging and social networking at one place online, according to the analyst.

Facebook has been improving the ability of members to use its services from Internet-linked mobile telephones, devices typically used by "Twitterers" to file Haiku-style messages about what they are doing or thinking.

Fast-growing Facebook boasts more than 175 million members and founder Mark Zuckerberg believes that number will crest 200 million by the end of this year.

Those signed up for the new Facebook public pages at its launch

included US President Barack Obama, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and rock band U2.

"There is a philosophical change; we want to converge all these different kinds of people on the website," Zuckerberg said.

"Bono, the New York Times, public figures and more have messages and want their voices heard by their audiences."

Pages for public figures and organizations are interactive, allowing Facebook users to post responses on "walls" of the likes of Sarkozy, Obama, Bono, and talk-show celebrity Oprah Winfrey.

Facebook will begin shifting users to a new home page design on March 11.

Changes include making the status update question "What's on your mind?" build on a theme in a Facebook home page redesign last year. The new home page lets people better filter messages or updates from those listed as "friends."

"Over the past five years, Facebook has evolved to make sharing information more efficient and to give people more control," Zuckerberg said of the website he started in 2004.

"This year, we are going to continue making the flow of information even faster and more customized."

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