

Go ahead, unfriend 'em

March 10 2009, By Jessica Yadegaran

I knew I had to delete her or suffer the consequences.

I'm talking about my [Facebook](#) profile, that page on the social networking site devoted to me and where 175 million other users around the world can "[friend](#)" me by sending a simple note. The female in question was an [acquaintance](#) of a friend. I barely know her, but she has a reputation as queen of [gossip](#) in the greater Los Angeles area.

I thought about it for another second then clicked "remove," and freed myself. Two days later, I was on the phone with the original friend and there was an awkward pause in our conversation. "So, Ashley is hurt that you don't want to be her friend," my friend told me. I wasn't sure how to respond.

So I spoke the truth: "Ashley and I barely know each other. Who cares?"

Not long ago, most devotees of [social networking sites](#) believed in numbers. Fill your page with goofy photos and pensive updates then amass as many friends as possible to prove your popularity. These virtual friend armies became the norm, and even though we never spoke or saw each other, somehow we felt validated by the three- and even four-digit tallies. Now our pages are oversaturated, however, and we're craving a little peace and privacy. As such, friend pruning and unfriending have taken over as the latest behaviors on social networking sites such as Facebook, [LinkedIn](#) and [MySpace](#).

But rather than agonize over whom to remove _ your boss? your

girlfriend's mom? _ many users are starting from scratch or scaling back on whom they friend or accept requests from in the first place.

Discretion, it seems, has also surpassed the need for numbers, experts say.

SELF-CENSORSHIP

LizaDawn Ramirez of Hayward, Calif., knew it was time to do some major friend cleaning when she began censoring herself on her Facebook page. She had hit 143 friends, and didn't feel close to many. So, she deleted everyone and started over. First, she reached out and friended family. Then, close friends.

"It's awesome. It's so freeing," she says of the purge. "I know the people on my Facebook now and genuinely feel that they have my best intentions at heart. I don't have to censor myself anymore." She also got rid of her MySpace page and limits LinkedIn to a home for her resume. "I don't ever update my status there and just stay connected to colleagues in case I ever have to find a job," she says.

Today, Ramirez is happy with her 44 Facebook friends, and hasn't had to deny anyone. Most of the fat she cut was well-meaning but long-lost high school and college classmates or people she met at parties who reached out to her but whom Ramirez knew she would never hear from again. "I felt like Pokemon because people were trying to collect me," she says. Her rule now? "I'm definitely not going to accept anybody if I don't think we can carry on a legitimate relationship outside of Facebook," she says.

Yolanda Higareda of Union City, Calif., has all of five people on her Facebook page, and they're all relatives. She surfs chat rooms but doesn't belong to other social networking sites. The family uses Facebook to post photographs of the children. Higareda did friend one person outside

of her family, and eventually deleted her following an offline falling out. "In this world, you just surround yourself with people who make you happy," she says. "You can get drama online and off. Who needs it?"

Before the Web turned networking into a computer-human relationship, socializing had to do with sharing place-appropriate information, says Dana Herrera, an assistant professor of anthropology at Saint Mary's College who researches virtual worlds such as Second Life. That could explain the added drama.

'WE'RE SOCIAL CREATURES'

"When we would socialize at work or school, we would talk about work or school information," Herrera says. "We're social creatures. We enjoy feeling part of a group. This is how we developed as humans. One thousand years ago, being taken out of the group was a social commentary on your success."

Even though the sites don't alert the person who's been dumped -- the sudden lack of access does -- the situation can still be awkward. Even for Herrera. "I can't begin to understand the social ramifications of unfriending a student," she says. So, at the beginning of each semester, the professor encourages her students to friend her but suggests they consider their click very carefully.

"I remind them that if they can see me, I can see them," she says. The result? Out of 70 students, one will end up friending her. A fellow professor at St. Mary's friends students only after they graduate, Herrera says. Another colleague, Herrera's co-researcher, adjunct economics professor Andres Margitay-Becht, poses this question: "If unfriending is so cruel or unusual or rude, then does it mean that in 30 years we'll still be friends with these students?"

Good point. Your online profile is your creation. So, if you have to remove someone -- be it a nosy ex or a handful of people you never interact with -- be firm. "The first step is admitting the problem. After that, take off 10 percent (of your friends)," says Greg Atwan, the New York-based co-author of "The Facebook Book" (Abrams Image, \$12.95), a satirical handbook for maximizing your Facebook page. "Cut anybody that you're sick of. If you're sick of hearing about so-and-so's dog grooming, he's not going to notice when you drop the ax."

In the book, Atwan suggests "trimming the friend hedge" twice a year. In his circle of twentysomethings, 500 friends is the sweet spot. For folks older than 30, the largest growing segment of Facebook users, it's often less. If you're concerned about hurting someone's feelings, don't be. "There's a difference between the passive aggressive unfriending of someone you know well and you think will notice, and the judicious pruning of the hedge," Atwan says.

A while back, Atwan noticed that a circle of people associated with an ex-girlfriend had ritually unfriended him. He didn't make a big deal about it. "This is how friendship is defined now," he says. "It used to be by Aristotle and now it's by my Facebook page." As for the random friend from junior high, there is an ignore button, he adds.

TOO MUCH INFORMATION

Experts, such as Margitay-Becht, believe that the social downsizing comes as consumers realize the pitfalls of sharing personal details with acquaintances and strangers. And as these sites continue adding applications that encourage users to share even more juicy information -- from home videos to politically inclined invitations -- all those so-called friends may know more about you than some of your distant cousins.

"One of the major points that's happening is a desire to reduce the

information clutter," he says. "These online personalities have a life of their own and there are large privacy issues here. Everyone's burned themselves, and when that happens, the knee-jerk reaction is to cut off as many people as possible."

It's sobering, to say the least. At least most social networking sites have privacy settings that can limit the amount of personal information people see about you. You can also block people and control who can search for you. But they're not for everybody.

"Unless you're a bona fide celebrity or in the CIA, it doesn't seem necessary to use the privacy settings," Atwan says. "The entire premise of Facebook is that if two people have a lot in common and don't know each other, they should be able to come together through Facebook. That to me is a sounder basis for friendship than junior high."

Unless the person's a Los Angeles gossip.

TIPS ON UNFRIENDING

Looking to downsize your social army? Follow the tips below, which include suggestions from Greg Atwan, co-author of "The Facebook Book" (Abrams Image, \$12.95), a guide for Facebook users:

- Admit you have a problem amassing too many friends. Then, cut off 10 percent.
- Continue to cut off people you're sick of hearing about. That includes the friend of a friend who posts regular updates about grooming her dog.
- Trim your friend hedge every six months.

- If someone unfriends you, don't make a big deal out of it.
- If you unfriend someone and she confronts you about her hurt feelings, be honest. Assure the person you didn't mean to hurt her feelings but that you are trying to limit your page to close friends.

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