

Here's a guide to social networking for clueless adults

May 13 2009, By Mary Beth Breckenridge

Welcome to Facebook, children of the 20th century. Since the social network, initially developed for students, relaxed its rules in 2006 to let in pretty much anyone older than 13, millions of users who predate the Internet revolution have joined the ranks of the wall-posting, status-updating, photo-tagging multitudes.

Only one problem: Unless you have a 14-year-old in the house to explain it to you, Facebook can be kind of confusing.

Why, we're left to wonder, would someone send us a picture of a gift instead of the real thing? And is it appropriate to poke someone other than a significant other?

Hence, our Facebook for Fogies guide.

This primer isn't intended to be a complete Facebook owners' manual, but rather an attempt to clear up some aspects that tend to puzzle its more mature users. Its contents were prompted by questions and comments solicited from my equally befuddled Facebook friends and answered with the aid of Facebook's Help Center and two books, Facebook Me! by Dave Awl and Facebook for Dummies by Carolyn Abram and Leah Pearlman.

To each of them, I owe my thanks and a virtual margarita.

ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT FACEBOOK

Q: How do I get on Facebook?

A: That's easy. Just go to www.facebook.com , fill in the blanks and click on "Sign up."

All you need is an [e-mail](#) address, which can't be the same address a spouse or someone else uses on Facebook. If you don't have a unique address, you can get one by signing up for a free e-mail account through services such as Google's Gmail.

Q: Can everyone on Facebook see what I've posted?

A: Not unless you want them to. Facebook gives you the ability to control fairly specifically who sees what. Just click on "Settings" in the blue bar that's always at the top of the page, and then choose "Privacy settings" from the drop-down menu.

If you haven't explored this part of Facebook, you should. The default setting is "networks and friends," and that might be a wider circle than you want viewing your postings.

It's important to remember that the whole purpose of Facebook is sharing information, and almost nothing you do there is entirely private. So use your judgment. Don't post anything unless you're comfortable with the whole world seeing it, and be especially judicious with something that might embarrass someone else. You might think it's funny to post a photo of your friend chugging a pitcher of beer at a frat party 20 years ago, but your friend might not feel the same way if his teenager or employer is on Facebook.

Q: Is there a way to choose who among my friends can see what I've

posted?

A: Yes. Even among your friends, you can exclude individuals or groups of people from viewing parts of your profile, if you wish.

Most categories of postings give you a "customize" option. When you click it, you'll find a place where you can type in the name of a friend or a friend list you wish to exclude.

Q: What do you mean by "friend list"?

A: That's just a way of lumping together your friends to make dealing with them easier. You could create a list of all your college friends, for example, or all your relatives.

Lists are also a way to rank your Facebook friends, especially if you have a lot of them. You might create one list for those nearest and dearest to you, another list for more casual friends, a list for family members and a list for people who aren't that important in your life. (By the way, a friend can be on more than one list, and that person won't know which lists he or she appears on.)

Why group friends? Well, if you're pressed for time and want to know what's happening with just your best friends, you can click on that friend list and get updates limited to them. Or if you want to notify your old high school buddies about the upcoming reunion, you could send a private message just to them.

Q: Private message? What's that about?

A: While just about everything you post on Facebook is more or less public, Facebook allows you to communicate with friends privately through its equivalent of an e-mail message. Just hover your pointer over

"Inbox" on the blue bar, and you'll get a couple of options including "Compose New Message."

You can send a single message to a group of up to 20 friends.

Q: What's with all these apps?

A: "App" is short for application, which is just a broad term for a whole bunch of things you can do on Facebook -- pass a virtual drink to a friend, keep track of birthdays, create a list of your favorite cereals to post on your wall, and so on. Some apps are created by Facebook's staff, but most are devised by outside developers.

Some apps are useful, some are just entertaining and some raise money for causes. It's a game that lets you tend a pretend garden, a fun way to teach users about environmentalism. Sponsors make donations to rain forest reforestation projects when people use the app.

Some apps cost real money. If you want to send a friend a virtual gift from Facebook's gift shop, you'll pay for it -- in most cases, \$1, or 100 gift credits.

Keep in mind that when you use an application, you're essentially giving the administrator access to your information. There's always a possibility that misuse, such as spamming, will result.

Q: How do you find these apps?

A: In many cases, through your friends. Maybe someone will send you a virtual cupcake or post the results of a quiz telling who she was in a previous life. Just follow the link to try that app yourself.

Or, go to the Application Directory by clicking on "Applications" at the

bottom of the screen and then clicking "Find More."

One word of caution: Often an application will prompt you to try to get your friends to participate. Don't assume you have to do this. Apps are required to have a way to let you bypass this function.

Q: I took an IQ quiz, but to get the results I had to enter my cell-phone number. I didn't realize I was subscribing for text messages I had to pay for. How can I avoid those kinds of unpleasant surprises?

A: When you first click on the link to an application, you'll get a page of information about it. Before you use the application, glance at its star rating, reviews and feedback on the wall and discussion boards. You might also check whether any of your friends use that application, particularly friends whose judgment you trust.

It's not a foolproof vetting method, but at least it should give you a sense of whether problems are associated with the app.

(By the way, if you got sucked in by that IQ test, just reply to one of the text messages with the word "Stop.")

Q: What is a poke? It sounds kind of naughty.

A: A poke is just Facebook's version of a tap on the back, a way of saying, "I'm thinking about you" without having to write anything.

That's nice, but it's also sort of limiting. That's why Superpokes were born.

Superpokes let you pretend to take any number of actions, from dancing with a person to giving him or her a restraining order. (Really, it's all in good fun.)

To poke someone, just go to that person's profile and click "Poke So-and-So" under the person's picture. To Superpoke someone, you need to go to the Superpoke application page.

Q: I'm married and use my spouse's last name. How will old friends find me?

A: Under your account settings, you have the option of entering a former name. This could be a maiden name, a former married name or an alias. Facebook doesn't judge.

When someone searches Facebook for that name, your information will pop up in the results. However, the searcher will get only your current name, so he or she still might not recognize you.

That's why a lot of women on Facebook use both their maiden and married surnames on their profiles. To change yours, go to your account settings, click "change" next to your name and enter your maiden name in the middle-name space.

Q: What is a network?

A: Joining a network gives you the opportunity to open your profile to a wider group of people, if you wish, without opening it to all of cyberspace. It also gives you access to information that might interest you.

Your network might be your geographic area, your workplace or your school. Each network has its own page, with event postings, discussion boards and a wall.

To join a network, go to your account settings and click on the "Networks" tab. You won't find a list of available networks, but you can

enter the name of your city, region, school or workplace and see what comes up. For a school or workplace, you may need to have an e-mail address associated with that institution to join its network. Q: What are notes?

A: Notes are a little like blogs. You can write pretty much whatever you feel like there.

Notes are used to create the self-revealing lists that circulate around Facebook ("25 random things about me," "Interview with my child," etc.). Users answer the questions in the list and then tag some of their friends to do the same.

Q: What do you mean by "tag"?

A: Tagging has a couple of meanings on Facebook. To tag a photo means to add a label identifying someone in the picture. To tag someone in a note means you want to bring the information to that person's attention, or you want him or her to create a similar note -- as in "tag, you're it!"

To tag someone in a note, just type that person's name in the box to the right of the note. To tag a photo, click "Tag this photo," put your pointer on the face of the person you're identifying and click. You'll get a box where you can insert information.

You can tag other people's photos, and you can also remove your name from photos in which you've been tagged. But if you want the photo removed, you'll have to ask your friend to do it. Or beg. Or threaten.

Q: It seems like every time one of my Facebook friends has a thought, an e-mail appears in my inbox. It's getting overwhelming. What can I do about it?

A: Facebook notifies you whenever someone does something that involves you. Those notifications also appear on your page. To find them, look for a little red box with a white number in it at the bottom right of your page, which indicates how many notifications you've received. Then click on the rectangular icon just below it, which looks a little like a movie screen.

Since you get notifications that way, you don't have to receive them by e-mail unless you want to. To find the place where you can turn notifications off or on, go to your account settings and click on the "Notifications" tab.

Q: If I ignore a request to become someone's friend, will that person know?

A: Facebook won't send the person a notification of your action. Nor will Facebook notify someone you've deleted from your list of friends. But since friendships on Facebook are mutual, the person might notice whether you appear on or disappear from his or her list of friends.

It's not a bad idea to limit your friends, by the way. The more friends you have, the more updates you get on their Facebook activities, and the more time it takes to read through all of them. What's more, Facebook takes away your ability to be a human chameleon -- to behave one way with some people and another way with others. If you don't want your co-workers or fellow church members reading your off-color banter with your college friends, it might be better to limit whom you let into your Facebook world.

Q: What's the difference between writing on someone's wall and going wall-to-wall?

A: When you write on someone's wall, your message appears in

chronological order, with no context. Wall-to-wall is more like a message string, a back-and-forth. You and your friend can read everything you've written to each other.

Q: Is it rude not to respond to an invitation or a poke?

A: Not in my opinion. Unless your friend is paying close attention, he or she probably won't even notice.

If you really feel guilty about it, just send that person a friendly note explaining that while you love keeping up with him or her, you're just not interested in all those extra applications. Some Facebook users enjoy doing things like poking friends and playing online games; others don't understand the appeal.

SOCIAL NETWORKS COME WITH RISKS

Social networks such as Facebook can be valuable tools for keeping touch and rekindling old friendships.

But like most good things, misuse can be unhealthy, says Michael McKee, a psychologist at the Cleveland Clinic.

McKee sees Facebook as a potential boon to relationships, particularly among adults. It makes it easy to exchange family photos, reunite with old classmates and keep up a relationship when an e-mail exchange might quickly fall off -- all healthy ways of relating, he said.

The trouble, he said, comes when Facebook starts to become addictive or is used to avoid real relationships.

In the virtual world of Facebook, e-mail and chat rooms, it's easy to get involved in an online relationship to the exclusion of working on your real relationships, McKee said. That's a particular danger because it's so easy to present only your best side online, he said.

"You're taking a lot of time away" from the real people in your life, he said. "It's a guilty pleasure, and I think that's not a good thing."

If you find yourself spending too much time online with someone, McKee suggested talking to your real significant other about it. "Otherwise, your secrecy and guilt about it will get communicated somehow," he said. Most likely, your loved one will sense something's going on anyhow.

Counseling might be merited, he said. He recommended finding a counselor who uses a type of short-term therapy called interpersonal therapy to help you understand what you really want in a relationship and why you're headed in the wrong direction in an attempt to meet your needs.

Addiction is another danger, McKee said. The positive reinforcement Facebook provides -- getting an encouraging comment from a friend, for example, or hearing from a long-lost pal -- releases dopamine in the brain, a neurotransmitter linked to pleasure, he explained. Pretty soon, you need more and more of that reinforcement to get the dopamine rush you crave. And that can result in addictive behavior, he said.

McKee said the warning signs of Facebook addiction are the same as with any addiction: You use it to bring you good feelings and avoid unpleasant or nonexistent feelings, and you find that your use is interfering with the rest of your life.

McKee isn't aware of a Facebookers Anonymous, but he said counseling

can help, ideally with someone who has experience with addictive disorders. Group therapy as part of the treatment is beneficial, because it provides the relationships you're seeking, but in a healthy way, and it allows empathetic people to share their insight and methods of coping.

A more likely risk of Facebook, however, is simply that you'll reveal more about yourself than you should, McKee said.

Be judicious in what you post, he advised. Realize that not everyone can be trusted with the most intimate details of your life, and post only what you're comfortable telling the most distant of your friends.

Be sensitive to your [Facebook](#) friends' feelings, too, he said. It's easy to embarrass other people unintentionally, so think twice about those flippant comments and unflattering old photos that are so easy to share online.

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