

# How Stuff Works: Social networking

August 25 2009, By Marshall Brain

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For the last two years, the amount of buzz and discussion around sites like Facebook and Twitter has been deafening. And lately the headlines have been especially interesting.

Older Americans are now flocking to these sites like never before. To the point where, last week, three people asked me, "Should I start using Facebook?" These are all seniors who are hearing about [social media](#) sites from their friends. They are wondering if they should take the plunge too.

So let's start at the beginning. The idea behind "social media" and "[social networking](#)" is pretty simple. A social media site lets people socialize online. Instead of talking to people at a church dinner, you talk to them on a web site. That's been possible in simple ways for a long time.

For example, there are millions of "forums" on the Internet. Usually a forum deals with a specific topic, like knitting or car repair or politics. People go to forums to ask questions, answer questions, state their opinions, get ideas, etc. For nearly every subject on the planet there is a forum, and these forums can be a great way to learn new things.

A site like Facebook tries to integrate many different tools together to turn online socializing into a richer experience. Therefore Facebook has forums, and it also has its own email system as well as a way for you to publish your own [blog](#). But the big thing that Facebook offers is a way to connect with your friends and acquaintances.

The idea is pretty simple. Millions upon millions of people have accounts on Facebook. So you look around and find all the people you know, and you connect with them by inviting them to be a Facebook friend. If they accept, they go into your list of friends. This list can be as big or as small as you like. Some people use Facebook to communicate with their close, current circle of friends. Other people connect with everyone they have ever known all through their lives. Celebrities can have millions of followers.

Once you connect with friends, you have several ways to communicate with them. You can email them, chat with them in real time, "poke" them, post messages on their public areas for their friends to see, comment on their photos and posts, give them updates about what you are doing right now, etc.

Once you sign up, people are going to start contacting you as well. This is both the blessing and the curse of Facebook, especially for the first month or two. There is a high likelihood that you will be contacted by dozens (potentially hundreds) of people from your past: High school and college classmates, people from church, business associates, etc. Many of these people you have not thought about for decades.

Suddenly, there they are back in your life, and they have questions. Especially for the first month or two, Facebook has the potential to consume a huge amount of time and dredge up a huge number of memories.

[Twitter](#) is a different experience. Here the idea is to publish short messages about your life. A good friend once explained it this way. Remember back in college, you might have left a note on your door that said, "I went to the library to study". This was before the age of instant cell phone communication. Your friends would see the note, and if they wanted to find you they knew where to go. Twitter gives everyone a

virtual "door" like that, and people can post messages to say where they are, what they are thinking about, etc.

If you want to check on a friend and see what he/she is doing, you can look up their page on Twitter and get an up-to-the-minute status report. (Facebook also has a Twitter-like feature). Twitter, like [Facebook](#), can take a lot of time. In order for it to be useful to others, you need to update it with some frequency.

A good question to ask yourself: "Does anyone care where I am going to be for the next 2 hours, or what I am thinking right now?" If so, Twitter might be a good tool for you to use.

If you are curious, it doesn't hurt anything to give either or both of these sites a try. Just be ready to invest a (sometimes sizable) block of time at the beginning.

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