

Social media users 50 and older are fastest-growing Web demographic

September 24 2010, By Mark W. Smith

Awash in jargon -- "wall," "news feed," "tags," "defriend" -- social media can be intimidating for baby boomers and seniors who have spent most of their lives comfortably in an analog world.

But that isn't stopping them from signing up for sites like [Facebook](#) in droves.

Social media users 50 and older are now the fastest-growing demographic among Internet users, a recent Pew study showed.

In the last year, [social networking](#) among 50-plus Internet users nearly doubled -- from 25 percent to 47 percent, according to the Pew study. That's compared with an increase of 10 percentage points among Internet users 18-29 years old, whose membership level is now at 86 percent.

Just last week, a group gathered at a computer lab in Troy designed to teach the ins and outs of computing and the Web.

The Troy (Mich.) Senior Computer Learning Center has seen increased demand this year as digital holdouts face pressure from family and friends to make the leap, curriculum director Bob Treharne said.

"If they want to know what's going on in their grandkids' lives, they have to text or log on to Facebook," he said.

The top concern among the Troy group, however, was no different than the chief, well-weathered complaint about Facebook: privacy.

[Privacy concerns](#), paired with Facebook's affinity for redesigning the site and changing its policies on what information of yours it shares, have created an air of trepidation.

Nancy March, 80, of Troy chose to display an incorrect birthday and not identify two of her sons on her newly created Facebook profile.

"I don't want my kids being bothered with my busybody friends," March said.

Some also express concerns over infringing on their children's personal lives. For some, friending their child or grandchild is akin to snooping.

"I'll be crushed if I ask to get on my son's and he says, 'No, Mom, I don't want you to find out all this information,'" joked Sally Stevens, 63, of Troy, who has not joined Facebook but is considering it.

Privacy controls do allow users to decide which groups of friends see what information. Kids can choose to have certain updates kept from their parents and vice versa.

Stevens' son has actually urged her to use Facebook, saying it would free him from relaying so much daily information to her.

An increasingly gray Facebook can be tied closely to seniors' desire to keep in touch with those who have moved almost all their communications online.

People who are not on sites like Facebook can feel excluded from the sharing of family news and photos.

"I think I am missing out on a lot of old friends," Stevens, the holdout, said.

"I'm not from Michigan, and to stay in touch with family or friends or college friends, they're all over the United States, so this is a nice way to stay in touch, I'm sure."

For Katherine Dallas Hammond, 55, of Troy, who co-taught the [social media](#) class, Facebook has been a way to reconnect with her girlfriends from high school, making them "feel like we were still standing by our lockers."

"Immediately, you go back to that time and your relationship is immediately rekindled," Hammond said.

But at the Troy computing class, one woman who had heard that Facebook would share all one's information was reluctant to learn more.

"I don't want to ever use Facebook," said the woman, who declined to be identified, as she left class during a break. "I don't want to spend hours on that. I volunteer. I want to do other things."

For March, though, learning Facebook is a way to keep her mind sharp.

"It's important as seniors that we keep our mind busy," March said. "Some people like to play bridge. I do my crossword puzzles."

And, now, she has Facebook.

HOW TO STAY SAFE ONLINE

The following are tips from Henry Lau, 29, of Sterling Heights, Mich.

Don't post your full birth date: While social networks like Facebook often ask you to fill this in, it can be a valuable piece of information, much like your Social Security number, to unlock more about you. Lau recommends leaving off your birth year.

Don't click on e-mailed links: E-mail scams will often purport to be from your bank or credit card company. The links will actually take you somewhere else. It's best to go to your Web browser and navigate to the bank's site manually.

Use strong passwords: Strong passwords include letters, numbers and capitalization diversity. It's also best to leave out obvious things like the name of a pet or child.

If you don't feel comfortable, don't do it:

Much like real life, there are dark alleys on the Web, Lau says. It's always best to follow your gut if you don't feel comfortable clicking on a link or going to a Web site.

Always log out: Especially when using a public computer in the library or lab, it's important to log out of Facebook after each session. Just closing the browser will not always accomplish the same thing.

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