

AOL cracks open door to new Project Phoenix e-mail

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You've still got mail - but AOL is redesigning it from the ground up to be faster and easier to use.

AOL Inc. is opening the doors to its new Web-based e-mail program, code-named Project Phoenix, for a limited number of users. Starting next year, anyone will be able to sign up for access to a beta test site.

The Project Phoenix inbox page was designed to make it easier to fire off a quick e-mail, text or instant message with just a few clicks on a "quick bar" at the top of the page. People can also send short replies right from the inbox page, without having to click on a message first. The new design displays thumbnails of recent photo attachments at a

glance, and lets people toggle between several open e-mails at a time.

When someone is reading an e-mail with pictures attached, the photos will also show up as thumbnails next to the message. Addresses in the body of the e-mail will trigger the system to display a map from AOL's Mapquest on the right-hand side, with the option to click for directions.

Like Yahoo and other competitors, AOL is trying to become the one-stop shop for reading messages from other providers. Project Phoenix lets people link up their e-mail accounts on services from Microsoft Corp., Yahoo Inc. and [Google](#) Inc. In future versions, AOL plans to pull in Twitter, [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#) messages, too.

The early beta felt sluggish when a reporter tried it out recently, but AOL said its tests show that the Phoenix inbox page loads about twice as fast as Google's [Gmail](#) inbox.

Markedly absent from the new design: advertising. Fletcher Jones, the project lead for Phoenix, said AOL is working on other ways to make money from the free e-mail service because the old model - at least one towering, animated ad dominating the right-hand side of the screen - isn't very user-friendly. Jones would not say exactly what AOL's plan is, but one tactic is placing links to top AOL stories inside the inbox. AOL's content sites are more ad-heavy.

"We're a different company than we were a year ago," Jones said in an interview. "The prior administration had priorities on revenue versus audience growth. Our priorities are on audience growth."

About two weeks ago, the New York-based company overhauled the main AOL.com home page with more white space, hipper logo art, bolder photos and icons and a stronger focus on content from its network of websites and blogs. AOL Mail, which accounts for about 45 percent

of AOL's total page views, is an important way to help users find all this new content. After all, Jones said, no matter what else is going on, people check their e-mail every day.

But AOL is juggling the need to attract new traffic with the fact that many of its users have been around since the days of dial-up Internet access. The company plans to give existing customers the option to use the Project Phoenix system, and is providing live chat and other 24-hour customer service to support the transition. AOL doesn't have a firm plan for switching everyone over to the new design.

As people are invited into the Project Phoenix beta, they'll also have a chance to sign up for a new AOL e-mail address - a gift for folks who have come to regret their early aol.com screen name choices.

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