

Review: Google Plus thoughtful answer to Facebook

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This screen shot shows a page from Google Plus. Google Plus offers many of the benefits of Twitter, but without its 140-character limit. You can follow anyone without being accepted, whereas Facebook requires the consent of both sides. (AP Photo)

(AP) -- My first thought about Google Plus: "Here we go again." After Google's earlier attempts at social networking failed spectacularly, it was easy to scoff at this seeming Facebook wannabe.

Its "[Picasa ultimatum](#)" didn't help much either. If you have an account with Picasa, Google's [photo-sharing](#) service, the first thing [Google](#) asks is whether you'd want to share your Picasa photos. Say no, and you're not allowed to sign up at all. That seemed unnecessarily harsh.

But I quickly became addicted to Google Plus, a free service that the company is testing with a small group of users for now. It has smart and thoughtful solutions to some irksome limits entrenched in other social-media sites, mainly related to privacy settings and how to share links and posts with groups.

Google Plus seems aimed at people who are more interested in sharing things with people or groups with similar interests rather than simply amassing the biggest number of online "friends." Its seamless integration with other Google services you may use, from search to online documents, makes it easier to share things online.

I found privacy settings much easier to manage on Google Plus than on [Facebook](#). The Picasa ultimatum forced me to learn about the settings. After all, the first thing you're likely to do after joining is limit who can see your photos.

Privacy - deciding whom you share different posts with - seems to be top of mind on Google Plus. That's a relief after Google's earlier debacle with Google Buzz, which had arrived unsolicited and initially created circles of friends automatically based on whom they've corresponded with on Gmail. That meant your boss could see lists of people you've been corresponding with for a new job.

With Google Plus, no one gets added automatically. Once you sign up, you add people - similar to how you follow people on Twitter. Then, rather than throwing everyone into the same bucket, you choose a circle to put them in.

Four circles are standard: "friends," "family," "acquaintances" and "following." You can follow anyone without being accepted, whereas Facebook requires the consent of both sides.

You can create new circles, too, such as "co-workers" and "cousins." Facebook has customizable groups, as well, but I found the groups on Google Plus much easier to use and quicker to navigate.

Separating people into categories can seem awkward at first. I felt impolite putting people in "acquaintances" rather than "friends" even though no one can see which circle you put them in. But once you get used to it, you can easily share photos of your beach vacation with just your friends - your actual friends, not the broad Facebook definition. Those photos could be off-limits to your boss or your great aunt Zelda, say.

Any post or link goes only to the circle or circles you designate, and you can drill down to sharing with just one or two people, or no one. You can also make a link public to share it with everyone - including people who have added you to their circles but whom you haven't added to yours.

However, the [privacy settings](#) aren't perfect. Although you can choose to share a post with a limited number of people, the recipients can re-share the post further. It takes some digging to figure out that you can disable re-sharing by clicking on an icon to the right of a post. Google Plus is in very early testing, so these types of settings could still change.

Unlike Facebook, Google Plus also lets you edit posts after you post them and decide for each post whether to allow comments, a feature I liked.

Two other features, the ability to group video chat via webcam, called a "Hangout," and the ability to chat with a group, called a "Huddle," have proven to have so much appeal that Facebook quickly followed suit. The company said Wednesday that it will also roll out group chatting and video chatting by teaming with Internet phone company Skype. It will be interesting to see if Facebook ends up adding other Google Plus features.

Other facts: Google Plus has a "+1" button rather than a "Like" button, but the feature is similar. The only difference is, once you sign up for Google Plus, you see this "+1" button next to every single Google search item, which feels a bit Big Brother-ish.

On that note, whenever you are on the main Google site or any of its progeny, you also have a black Google bar across the top of your browser, with a Google Plus link. That makes it easy to log on at odd moments. A red notification box alerts you to Google Plus activities, such as when people add you to one of their circles.

Google Plus has a few gaping holes.

For example, you can't search ... yet. And there are no addictive third-party apps such as "FarmVille," which people have sunk countless hours playing on Facebook.

Another thing you can't do easily, strangely, is send a message. To do that you have to create a post and only select one person to see it. It's not rocket science, but with Facebook you can simply click on a person's profile and send a message instantly. I realize [Gmail](#) is a button click away, and Google Plus is intended to be a sharing site rather than a full-service social media site, but I still wanted this feature.

Overall, in my early testing, I find Google Plus a compelling answer to some existing problems in social media. Because of its integration with other Google services and its general ease of use, I would probably prefer using Google Plus to Facebook or [Twitter](#).

But it all depends on how many people sign up. A sharing site isn't much fun if no one is around to share with. For now, I can't invite friends to join. Google Plus is free, but the company is restricting new sign-ups. Even those who already got a coveted invite are told to try joining later

because Google Plus had exceeded its capacity.

That points to widespread interest the service and its potential to challenge Facebook. Unlike Google Wave and Google Buzz, which never resonated with users, Google Plus does seem more attuned to what people actually want.

As my co-worker put it, Google Plus is the "grown-up Facebook."

Do we really need that? We'll see.

More information:

<http://www.google.com/intl/en/+/learnmore>

<http://www.google.com/+demo>

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