

Review: Take the time to curate Facebook Timeline

December 21 2011, By ANICK JESDANUN , AP Technology Writer



In this Sept. 11, 2011 file photo, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg shows Timeline during the f/8 conference in San Francisco. Timeline offers highlights from your whole life, all the way back to your birth. But these are highlights as Facebook sees it _ the stuff you and your friends had chosen to write or post photos about over the years. (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma, File)

I've often joked that if something's not on Facebook, it didn't happen. Facebook's new Timeline feature makes that adage even more apparent.

Timeline is Facebook's new way of presenting you to the world. It replaces your traditional profile page - the one with your headshot and a smorgasbord of personal musings, [photos](#) and other items to share with friends. Instead of just a [snapshot](#) of you today, Timeline is supposed to be a scrapbook of your whole life.

But these highlights are culled from what Facebook sees as important -

the stuff you and your friends have chosen to write or post photos about over the years. So it's crucial to spend time curating it, so your life doesn't come across as vain. If you're not careful, you also might reveal skeletons from your past to more recent friends.

Once you're ready for Timeline, you have a week to airbrush your life before it replaces your current profile. That's not a lot of time when you have (cough, cough) years of your life to go through. I suggest focusing on the years since you joined Facebook. You can always add photos from childhood later.

To set up Timeline, visit <http://facebook.com/timeline> . Facebook will force you to switch within a few weeks, so don't procrastinate.

MAKING A SPLASH

Start by choosing a cover photo, the image that will splash across the top. You can choose a sunset, your dog, a hobby, anything that reflects who you are. Keep in mind the dimensions are more like a movie screen than a traditional photo. A close-up portrait of your face won't work well, but one of you lying horizontally will.

Your old profile photo will still be there, but it'll be smaller.

If you haven't done so already, you can add where you've worked, lived and went to school. If you specify years - such as when you started a job - those items will be added to Timeline's stream of life events, even if they took place before Facebook's founding in 2004.

You can also add other life events to the stream, such as when you broke your arm and whom you were with then, or when you spoke your first word or got a tattoo. By adding them to Facebook, you signal that those things really did happen.

MORE ON THE STREAM

The timeline stream is your life on Facebook in reverse chronological order.

At the top are your recent status updates, comments from family and friends, photos you're in and events you've attended. As you scroll down, you'll get highlights from last month, then earlier in the year. Scroll down even further for last year, the year before that and so on. Click one of the "Show" links to get all posts from a particular month or year.

Posts will be more sporadic the further you go back. You'll see when you joined Facebook and the first post you ever made - mine was "Anick Jesdanun is wasting a lot of time on facebook."

Beyond that, you may see details about high school or college. A colleague even saw the birth of her younger brother listed, after having told Facebook which of her friends were her siblings.

The bottom simply says "Born" with your birth date and birthplace, if you've chosen to share that.

This may come across as a big privacy breach, but keep in mind that people could have seen many of those posts before by continually hitting "Older Posts." The difference is most people wouldn't bother. With Timeline, you can jump more quickly to older posts.

Another thing to consider: Although your privacy settings remain the same, your list of friends has likely grown over the years, and your definition of friends has probably broadened to include parents, bosses and random flings at weddings. Someone you didn't know in 2008 would suddenly have easier access to something you posted then.

CURATING YOUR LIFE

You can change who has access to which posts. Perhaps you'd want to narrow an embarrassing photo from Thanksgiving to family members who were there. You might want to delete other posts completely or hide them so that only you can see them.

You can change the date on a post. For example, if you had waited a week to tell the Facebook world that you broke up with someone, you can change the date to reflect when all the screaming and crying took place. You can also add where you were, retroactively using a location feature that Facebook hadn't offered until recently.

For major events in your life, you can click on a star to feature them more prominently.

You'll likely feel overwhelmed when you see your Timeline for the first time. Years-old posts made by people you're no longer friends with are still there. Musings on a trip or a long-forgotten event suddenly lack context. Your life may also come across as duplicative, such as when multiple friends post similar photos from the same party.

Here are a few tips:

- Start with your older posts. You were probably experimenting with Facebook then, and most of those could go into hiding. Plus, those are the ones you'd need to be most careful about because you had reason to believe only a few friends would see them.
- Find the button for Activity Log. Click that to see all of your posts at a glance and make changes to them one by one. Open Facebook in a new browser tab first, though. Every time you switch between the log and the timeline stream, Facebook resets to a default view rather than let you

return to where you were. So have one tab for the log and the other for the stream.

- Think carefully about what you want to highlight when people scroll through your past. Facebook has a secret formula for determining which items are included in your highlights, using such factors as how many friends commented on a post. That may not necessarily be what you want to showcase.

Unfortunately, getting the stream to look right is difficult.

There's no easy way to highlight something Facebook's formula didn't pick, without starring it such that it gets splashed across the page. I also couldn't find a good way to remove something from the highlights without hiding or deleting it completely. There are events I wouldn't consider major, but would want people to see if they took the time to browse through my past.

There also ought to be a way to star or hide posts in batches.

And oddly, Facebook includes stuff posted by others, but it doesn't include items you've posted on other profiles. Older posts come across as one-sided without the back and forth for context.

MOVING FORWARD

Overall, I like the concept behind Timeline. I got a nice stroll down memory lane, and I enjoyed stalking my friends and uncovering their pasts, too.

I just wish it were easier to customize, and I don't appreciate being rushed. Facebook spent months developing Timeline and rolling it out to its 800 million users. Why give us just seven days?

If you're not ready to start Timeline, you can still view Timelines your friends have already activated. Just keep in mind that Facebook eventually will force you to switch, so you might as well do it now if you have the time.

You might also want to take this as an opportunity to clean up your presence on [Facebook](#). Review your privacy settings and get rid of [friends](#) who don't need to be there. That will be the topic of next week's column.

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