

Facebook's Timeline change disrupts some businesses

March 28 2012, By Mike Swift

Stephen Terrell expected a group of happy users when he updated his company's Facebook profile page to the new Timeline format, allowing his mostly senior-citizen customers to register for a contest to win a trip to Hollywood to meet nonagenarian actor Betty White.

Instead, there was an explosion of [anger](#) and [confusion](#). When the Lifeline Program, the Atlanta company for which Terrell is [senior vice president](#) of branding, revamped its [Facebook](#) page last week, some elderly users trying to register for the contest were so angry and vocal that Terrell had to ban them.

"It is really creating a communication problem between us and our client base," Terrell said.

Ever since the controversial 2006 launch of its now ubiquitous [News Feed](#) feature, Facebook has seen a cycle of surprise, anger and later acceptance from its users when it launches or changes a major feature. But Facebook's requirement that all business profile pages convert to the Timeline format by the end of this month means that companies, [nonprofit groups](#) and other organizations that use Facebook pages must explain those changes to their customers, and in some cases may face the brunt of user anger about them.

"I think there is some pain that is going to happen, but you have to look at it from the overall perspective. I think it is a positive for most companies," said Michael Fauscette, an analyst with the research group

IDC who follows social networks. "It gives them a greater capability to promote their brand, and to really brand their pages and make them stand out."

Facebook says the massive transition to Timeline is going well, with more than 8 million brands and companies having already switched their pages to the new format. Big companies and brands like Ben & Jerry's, Dr. Pepper and Ford, Facebook says, have already strengthened their interaction with customers by using Timeline and other marketing tools that the social network announced at its first-ever marketing conference Feb. 29.

Timeline allows a more visual Facebook profile for a brand or company, and the ability to post historic photos or other descriptions that demonstrate its changes over time.

Some small and mid-sized businesses like the timeline switch. Early adopters like Enoteca La Storia, a Los Gatos wine bar whose founders want to recreate an authentic Italian wine bar experience in Silicon Valley, say it allows them to showcase their multi-generational Italian-American heritage, using historic family photos from San Jose and New York that date back to 1921.

"It's really helping us to convey to our customers what's unique about us," said Michael Guerra, a co-owner of the wine bar. "For a small business that's been open for about two years, it was one of the best responses we've gotten to anything we've done so far."

It's unclear whether older users are less happy about the switch to Timeline than younger Facebook members, but some sites that serve older users are bracing themselves for the upcoming change.

"If we had a choice, we wouldn't switch over to the Facebook Timeline

format - yet - because our community is not a big fan of 'big' changes," said Kim Hong, social media and community manager for San Mateo, Calif.-based Winster, a website that features social games and is heavily used by baby boomers and seniors.

For a new feature like Timeline, Winster tries to move gradually, explaining the need for the change openly and honestly to its users.

"I'm sure some will love it, and some will hate it. All we can do is to do our best to keep things simple for our community," Hong said.

Facebook has been careful about how it rolled out Timeline to individuals, but it is moving more quickly with the business transformation, allowing just one month between the announcement and the March 30 changeover. The company declined to comment on whether businesses are having problems with their customers because of the switch to Timeline.

The Lifeline Program, which allows seniors to convert their mature life insurance policies into cash, has used Betty White for a spokesperson for several years. Its Facebook page, which prominently features photos and videos of White, has more than 32,000 fans, of which 86 percent are seniors.

To run the contest, however, Terrell was forced to switch to Timeline ahead of the deadline. A poll that the company ran on its Facebook page after the switch found 98 percent either didn't like the changes or didn't understand them. Just 2 percent liked it.

"We're not changing a software app," Terrell said. "We're changing a window to the world for people who never experienced anything like this before."

With its growing share of older users, Facebook needs to be more sensitive to how its changes affect older users, Terrell said.

"I don't think they are thinking about the actual demographic groups when they put this new Facebook out there," he said. "They've actually enticed these seniors to become more active on the Internet, and these are the people who have really had to work to learn something new."

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