

# Interview: Budding Google social network sets itself apart

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Like the strong-willed youth it is, Google's budding social network is confidently going its own way.

In an AFP interview, [Google+](#) vice president Bradley Horowitz shrugged off [Silicon Valley obsession](#) with a Facebook [rivalry](#) and focused on the Internet titan playing to its strengths with an eye on the future.

"The way we think about Google+ is not pretending that today we can compete along every dimension of every [competitor](#) that is in a space,"

Horowitz said.

"The goals for Google+ are long-ranging and broad," he continued. "This is a reinvention of the consumer's relationship with Google that is going to unfold over a period of years."

The average number of people who use Google+ each month has climbed to 100 million since it opened to the public in September of last year. The figure for daily users is 50 million.

"Eventually, the 100 million users today are going to blossom into 500 million and by that time you will discover that all of your friends will be there on Google+," Horowitz predicted.

A unique Hangouts feature that lets as many as ten people at once get together for group video chats is a huge draw at the online community.

Hangouts can be limited to invited friends or opened to anyone.

The US president, musician Will.i.am, Desmond Tutu and even the Dalai Lama have taken part in "On Air" hangouts in which intimate online [gatherings](#) can be openly viewed at the social network.

"We think looking somebody in the eye and communicating in the normal social way we've learned to do over millennia is important," Horowitz said. "We wanted to bring that [authenticity](#) back into the equation."

Hangouts have surprised the Google+ team. They have been used for language and music lessons. A stutterers' support group uses them for group meetings.

Hangouts are used to let bedridden people virtually explore the world.

Longtime photographer John Butterill of Canada was new to Google+ when he took a sick friend on a "virtual photo walk" using a smartphone, a professional camera, and a hangout.

Butterill hiked snowy woods near his home during a streamed hangout in which his friend saw through the camera lens and directed the shots. A video of the walk posted at the social network went viral.

"I came home from the walk and there it was being shared by everyone," Butterill told AFP. "My mouth dropped open."

The friends launched a Virtual Photo Walks page at Google+ with a mission to "walk for those who can't."

Google+ users in cities around the world have signed on to act as legs and hands of people physically unable to venture out for themselves.

A photographer in Australia freshly recovered from a broken back virtually took a woman with Multiple Sclerosis on a walk to a beach in Perth.

"She said she never thought she'd hear the ocean again," Butterill said. "These people really know how to choke you up."

A photographer for nearly 40 years, Butterill insists that those directing shots get credit and rights to walk images.

"I am just the arms and legs," Butterill said. "It is like the person on the other side is holding the camera. It's just plain cool."

Virtual photo walks can go beyond picture-taking to being a way for people with disabilities to attend meetings or political events or even negotiate contracts in real time, according to Butterill.

"A soldier could take his hospitalized friend virtually to a pub for beer," he said.

Butterill's vision includes taking sick children on virtual photo walks of Disneyland.

"When we brought hangouts to market we knew we had something very special, but there was no way of telling whether this would be the next Chatroulette or something more meaningful," Horowitz said.

"It is really delightful when a product you built changes people's lives and you get these heartfelt stories about how it has touched them."

Google is weaving its social network into offerings such as its search engine and online video-sharing stage YouTube for a synergy that could offset the edge given Facebook by its network of more than 840 million members.

"Google of five years ago had many magical products, but they didn't sing in harmony," Horowitz said.

"We are creating a more comprehensive user experience across all of what we are doing," he continued. "We are threading the needle very carefully to do that without spoiling the magic."

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