

Google tweaks Plus social network for ease of use

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(AP) -- Google is tweaking its social network, Google Plus, to make it easier to use and to distinguish it from rival Facebook.

The most visible change is a new navigation ribbon on the left side of the Google Plus page with icons for the most used features, such as games, photos and your personal profile. Hover over an icon to do specific tasks, such as add photos from your phone or an online album.

You can reorder the features in the ribbon and hide the ones you don't use often.

The changes, announced Wednesday, are designed to help Google Plus adapt more easily to growth - and to make room for new features in the future.

In a blog post, Google calls the ribbon "an obvious (and clutter-free) space for The Next Big Feature, and The Feature After That."

Google Inc. CEO Larry Page has made Google Plus the centerpiece of his effort to tie all of the company's services together. Google is worried that Facebook has been carving out a competitive advantage by stockpiling valuable information about people's social circles and interests. The data has given Facebook the means to target ads precisely and deliver content tied to a user's hobbies and tastes.

Google said Google Plus has attracted more than 170 million users since

its debut nine months ago. That lags Facebook's 845 million user count, but it's far greater than Facebook's tally at that stage in its history.

Google Plus has yet to hold most users' attention. Visitors have been spending an average of just a few minutes per month on the network, compared with six to seven hours on Facebook, according to the research firm comScore Inc.

The new design could help Google retain users by making the experience more pleasant. The navigation ribbon, for instance, offers users more flexibility than Facebook in customizing a page.

Among the other changes:

- An easier way to build a community around content you post. You can see those who have reposted your photo or link and those who have endorsed it by hitting the "Plus One" button.
- A "Hangouts" icon on the navigation ribbon makes it easier to find and join group video chats, including those with strangers.
- An "Explore" option on the navigation ribbon, which points you to content that's most popular and talked about.

Google Plus users will see the latest changes this week. Some features that were available before will become more prominent with the redesign.

More information: <http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2012/04/toward-simpler-more-beautiful-google.html>

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