

Facebook, Twitter battle in 'real-time' arena

September 25 2013, by Brandon Bailey

Want to see what people are saying online, right now, about the newest iPhone software? You could always search for "#iOS7" on Twitter. But now you can also click the same hashtag on Facebook.

Either way, you'll get a stream of the latest comments from friends and strangers - and some messages from businesses that are touting games, applications or other products geared to Apple's latest upgrade.

"Real-time" conversations are emerging as the new battleground for competing social networks Facebook and Twitter, and for their advertisers. While Twitter has been beefing up its ad business in advance of its [stock market debut](#), Facebook has been adding features such as hashtags - words or phrases that represent a topic of discussion - and lists of topics that are currently "trending" as popular, both of which have long been elements of Twitter.

"Twitter has really popularized the idea that what's happening right now is really important, and you need to pay attention to it, whether you are a consumer or a marketer," said Debra Aho Williamson, an analyst for the eMarketer research firm. "Facebook knows that, within its walls, lots of those conversations are happening, too."

Timeliness has always been a key element of Internet [advertising](#): Google makes a big part of its fortune by showing ads that are geared to whatever you're searching for online, at the moment you're seeing the search results. Social networks want to sell ads that are geared to whatever people are talking about - "at that moment, not 30 minutes

from now, not tomorrow, when they've moved on to some other conversation," Williamson said.

A big part of that effort is focused on television. Twitter has touted its site to advertisers as a place where millions of TV viewers discuss their favorite shows, while they're watching. "The impact of using Twitter in combination with TV advertising is significantly greater than that of using TV advertising alone," Twitter product manager Michael Fleischman said in a blog post this summer.

Now, Facebook is also talking up the number of people who visit the social network during prime TV hours - between 88 million and 100 million U.S. users, or "roughly a Super Bowl-sized audience every night," the company said in a recent statement.

When it comes to active users, Facebook has a much larger global audience of more than 1 billion members, while Twitter claims more than 200 million. Facebook also is expected to sell more than \$6 billion worth of ads this year, compared with about \$600 million for Twitter, according to eMarketer.

Facebook makes greater use of what it knows about members' likes and interests to deliver targeted advertising of all kinds, analysts say, while Twitter is further along in selling "promoted tweets" or ads that are geared toward current conversations.

But Twitter has been adding services that it needs to attract corporate advertisers and demonstrate that ads on Twitter work. It recently bought two small companies that analyze social network chatter about TV shows, and is working with two others that track how consumers react to advertising messages. This month, Twitter bought an automated service that helps advertisers place messages on Twitter and other mobile sites.

Facebook, meanwhile, has been beefing up its "real-time" features. Along with hashtags and lists of "trending topics," Facebook has made it easy for bloggers and operators of other websites to include topical Facebook posts on their own sites.

Analysts say the company has moved cautiously because it must respect the wishes of members who only want to share their posts with friends. While Twitter operates under the default assumption that members' tweets are public, Facebook lets members choose whether to share publicly or with a narrower audience.

But Facebook clearly wants to share more public comments.

"We are committed to building features that improve the experience of discovering and participating in conversations about things happening in the world right now," Justin Osofsky, a Facebook vice president, said in a recent blog post.

Facebook released two new software tools to a handful of media partners this month: One provides a constantly updated stream of whatever members are posting on any topic. The other can show how many members - broken down by age, gender and location - are posting on a topic. Facebook says the tools only reveal posts that members designated as public.

To start, Facebook is sharing the tools with such media outlets as CNN, NBC's "Today" show and Slate, which can use them to report on what people are saying on Facebook. That's good publicity for Facebook, said Williamson, who pointed out that news outlets already run stories about what's "trending" on Twitter.

Facebook said it may also share the tools with advertising partners or agencies. Analysts say marketers would love that information.

"If you can tap into what your target audience cares about and what they're talking about now, you can join that conversation in ways that are engaging and compelling - instead of bombarding them with a message that's totally out of left field," said Jennifer Polk, a digital marketing analyst with the Gartner research firm.

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