

Facebook help a matter of timing

March 4 2015, by Rob Payne



She says more research is needed into social networking sites, noting that their openness creates unique social pressures which differ from the physical world. Credit: IBoomMedia

Getting a response to a request for assistance on social media may have more to do with your request's timing than how many followers you have, research suggests.

The insight comes from a Curtin University study that asked 459 participants to evaluate a 'newly developed' social networking site.

During this task, participants were subject to two requests, one asking

them to join a follow-up trial and the other to donate money to a children's charity.

Some participants were led to believe the request was made to them alone, while others believed it was made to them with one, three or 14 other people online.

Study author Katie Martin says the results suggest the 'diffusion of responsibility' principle found in the physical world works differently in the [virtual world](#).

"A lot of research has been done on bystander affect, especially in emergencies, with outcomes showing that the more people who are involved in a situation, the less likely an individual is to respond to a call for help," Ms Martin says.

"What we found with [social media](#) was that if a request is made to you alone or to one other person, you're more likely to respond, with social diffusion maxing out at around four people.

"So adding more people doesn't have any effect on the likelihood you'll receive a positive response."

However they found the timing of a request did impact on offers of assistance.

The study manipulated when requests appeared to have been made, with some marked 'posted today' and others 'posted two days ago'.

Action less likely amongst multiple users

The requests from two days prior were much less likely to be acted upon when there were four or 14 others on-line, suggesting a diffusion of

responsibly.

"People perhaps thought after 48 hours, a significant number of people would have seen the request and already pitched in," Ms Martin says.

She says more research is needed into [social networking sites](#), noting that their openness creates unique social pressures which differ from the physical world.

"On social media, everyone can see your responses, which creates worry about how others might view your actions," Ms Martin says.

The findings offer guidance for people looking for help on social media, with the researchers saying targeted requests to one or two people are likely to be more effective than casting a wide net to all of your followers.

"And hiding the time of your posting can be beneficial," Ms Martin adds.

More information: Katie K. Martin, Adrian C. North, "Diffusion of responsibility on social networking sites," *Computers in Human Behavior*, Volume 44, March 2015, Pages 124-131, ISSN 0747-5632, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.11.049](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.11.049).

Provided by Science Network WA

Citation: Facebook help a matter of timing (2015, March 4) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-03-facebook.html>

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