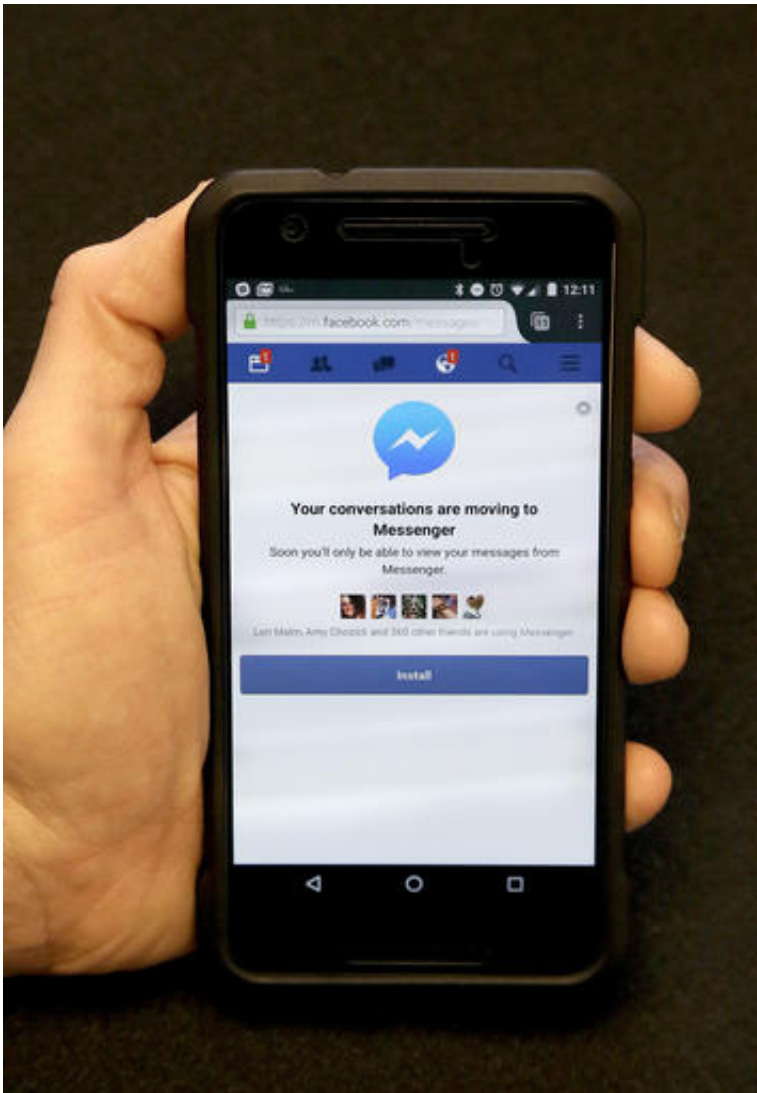


Facebook is pushing more people to an app they didn't choose

July 28 2016, by Michael Liedtke



An Associated Press reporter holds a mobile phone showing the Facebook Messenger app installation page in San Francisco, Wednesday, July 27, 2016. Facebook is pushing more people to install its Messenger application, now by

blocking people who want to send and receive messages via its mobile website instead of the app. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu)

Facebook is once again getting pushy about how people message one another.

Two years ago, the social-media giant forced its users to adopt its Messenger app for direct communication, a change it enforced by deactivating messages in the main Facebook app and steering users to the app. There was an uproar ; some users thought Messenger violated their privacy, while others just resented having to add yet another app.

Still, the plan worked; more than 900 million people use the app, roughly four times the number in 2014. But some continued to resist, exploiting a loophole to avoid Messenger. All they had to do was log into Facebook's mobile website using a smartphone browser like Safari or Chrome.

Now Facebook is coming after those holdouts. In some markets, the company has already blocked mobile browser access to messages on Android phones. In others, opening messages on Facebook's mobile website gets you a warning that "your conversations are moving to Messenger" and a link to download the app. The company will extend the ban to all markets and to iPhone users in the upcoming months, it says.

Facebook insists it only wants "to bring the best experiences we can" to users. The Messenger app provides more reliable notifications about incoming messages and runs more quickly, the company says.

More Free Stuff, Less Control

This might not seem like a big deal to many users, particularly anyone who's long since made their peace with Messenger. But it's emblematic of a central dilemma in the modern age: We have free—as in unpaid—access to an ever-expanding array of software and services, but less and less control over how we use them.

That rankles people who have no interest in Messenger. Michael Kampfer, a St. Paul, Minnesota, construction contractor, says he doesn't have enough storage space on either of his Android phones to install Messenger alongside the other apps that he needs for his job while traveling.

"I have a problem with the company telling me what's the best experience is for me," Kampfer, 65, says. "I have a browser on my phone, so why should I be forced to get Messenger?"

Kampfer is far from alone. In the U.S. alone, nearly 149 million people visited Facebook's website on a smartphone or tablet during April, according to the research firm comScore. The firm doesn't compile worldwide data for mobile browser traffic.

Business Considerations

From a business standpoint, Facebook's move makes great sense. Planting Messenger on more phones corrals a bigger audience for advertising and other moneymaking opportunities. The company doesn't comment on such plans, and Messenger is currently ad-free. But analysts think the app could generate billions of dollars in advertising revenue within just a few years.

The Menlo Park, California company is thriving, mostly from ads on its main Facebook app. Its second-quarter revenue soared 59 percent from

the same time last year to \$6.4 billion, resulting in a \$2.06 billion profit, the company announced Wednesday.

Facebook wants more of its users on Messenger because it can gather more personal data and introduce new features that could yield even more revenue, says eMarketer analyst Debra Aho Williamson. She expects ads to start appearing before the end of this year.

Even if some users don't like that, "Facebook has a way of changing things to make people interact with Facebook the way Facebook wants," Williamson says.

Facebook executives say Messenger is now moving into "phase two" of its evolution, although they still aren't ready to say how the company intends to profit from it.

Remote Control

Facebook has a long history of pushiness. A decade ago, it began circulating the status updates that users posted on their personal pages throughout the social network. The concept, known as a "news feed," is now the foundation of modern Facebook, even though it initially triggered protests about exposing too much personal information.

Kevina Cromwell of Philadelphia already tried the Messenger app and didn't like it. So she uninstalled it and the Facebook app a couple of years ago, and read her private messages on her on her phone's mobile web browser until the company started blocking her recently.

"It's really annoying," Cromwell, 22, says. "I see what they are trying to do, but I still don't understand why they are tying your hands and not giving you any options at all."

Future Of Messenger

Messaging is huge in the tech industry now; Google and Apple are pouring resources into their own apps to ensure their services remain a vital part of people's lives. A few years ago, Facebook also paid \$21.8 billion for the WhatsApp messaging service, which has more than a billion users. So far, it remains entirely separate from Messenger.

Facebook keeps spiffing up the Messenger app. Its latest look, which is still rolling out to users, now shows friends' birthdays, lists of favorite people and a thumbnail of who's online at any given moment. Facebook is also promoting the app as a way for merchants to interact with their customers, which could transform the service into a sort of digital call center.

Some Android phone owners say Facebook has gotten so aggressive about Messenger that visiting the mobile website for their texts now takes them directly to an app-download page, with no explanation why they were sent there. "It's almost like they're trying to trick you," says Jeni Tehan, who lives in Brighton, England.

People who still want to shun Messenger can still send and receive messages via the Facebook site, though only if they're on a full-fledged computer, not a phone or tablet. It's small consolation for some.

"The users are the product, not the customer, which I'm generally resigned to because of the usefulness of the service," Mel Campbell of Melbourne, Australia, says by email. "But I'm not going to cave to every single bad decision the company wants to push on us."

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