

Paresh Dave: Snapchat in 2017: 7 predictions about what's to come

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As Snap Inc. moves toward an expected initial public offering this year, it's natural to expect increased predictability and transparency from a company that has thrived so far without much of either.

In question in 2017 is whether Chief Executive Evan Spiegel will make Snap act more like Facebook or if he will continue forging a new route.

My guess: He'll walk the line between the two.

Last year, I correctly predicted Snapchat would add new ways to edit and watch photos and videos, chat as a group and appease the desire of advertisers.

Here's what's in store for 2017.

-Platform: A decade ago, Facebook began allowing other companies to develop applications that interacted with the social network. Soon, the Facebook logo appeared all over the internet. The functionality fostered the popularity of everything from "Farmville" to Spotify to Tinder. It enables people to log into third-party services with their Facebook credentials and for those apps to interact with Facebook data.

Snapchat has begun dipping its toes into becoming a platform on which others can rise. For instance, a partnership with Shazam puts the company's music-identification technology inside Snapchat. Expect Snapchat to stay with the boutique approach through 2017, doing one-

off integrations with financial, video gaming and sports companies before matching Facebook's wide-open approach.

-Personalization: Two people with the exact same friends would have nearly identical experiences on Snapchat. They'd see the same posts from friends and media companies in the same order.

But as Snap turns to maximizing the amount of ads people see, first displaying the posts likely to interest users the most could suck them into the app for longer. For now, Snapchat uses elements of gaming for that purpose: Friends are encouraged to interact every day to increase their chat "streak" score. That approach avoids the pitfall of sweeping people into silos, where they're only exposed to opinions like their own.

Expect Snapchat to move forward gingerly, with limited personalization such as "favorite" friends appearing first.

-Events: Snapchat and Instagram are the places to go to catch up on what went down last night. But what about figuring out what to do tonight? Friends have to exit the Snapchat app to find movie showtimes, upcoming sports games and top things to do in a new city. Partnerships with other firms - and even mining what people have previously shared on Snapchat - could fill the gap.

Expect Snapchat to introduce tools that help organizing going out.

-Context: For Snapchat to turn its users' posts into news and entertainment meant for widespread consumption on the app, it needs to better understand the context of the posts (the who, what, when, where and why). That means getting people to post more on Snapchat, so the company knows more about their lives. And it means using artificial intelligence to understand what's in an image.

Expect Snapchat users to become guinea pigs on both fronts. Snapchat could include prompts before users' post, encouraging them to share more details about where they are or what they're doing. But it should be slicker than Facebook asking you front and center what's on your mind today.

-Shopping: Snap offers ads that take people to retailers' apps for shopping, and it's working on reducing the steps between seeing an ad and getting an order confirmation. But can it facilitate transactions between friends, like a college student selling a coffee table? Can it allow job candidates to submit resumes to recruiters directly through Snapchat? What about personals ads for people seeking love and friendship?

Expect Snapchat to try to simplify life's commercial necessities. The question is whether it can become a hub for transactions that doesn't compromise the fun inherent in the app.

-Subscriptions: If Snapchat wants to be the entertainment center for millennials and younger, then are ads alone enough to sustain such a business? Television long has relied on advertising and subscription fees. Charging users to access videos and articles from ESPN, National Geographic, BuzzFeed and other featured publishers would feel odd in the current Snapchat experience, which is free. But paid subscriptions would be a strong option if Snapchat splits its media portal, known as Discover, into a separate app. Snapchat could entice people to sign up by bundling a free pair of Spectacles video camera sunglasses.

-Accessories: When it comes to hardware - such as the firm's Spectacles video camera sunglasses - Snap has promised more devices are coming. But the form they will take is unclear. On one hand, expect Snapchat to dabble in the smallest of devices, including phone cases, selfie sticks and bedside phone holders. Snap has already released ice cube trays and

playing cards, so it's not far-fetched to assume more novelty gags and gadgets.

On the other end of the spectrum, expect the company to develop devices that can get technology in the hands of people whose perspectives might go overlooked because of their lack of access to smartphones and strong cellular networks. The company wants to be the place where the world share its viewpoints. For now, huge swaths of it - both domestically and abroad - aren't using its products.

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