

Facebook wants to nudge you into 'meaningful' online groups

June 22 2017, by Barbara Ortutay And Michael Liedtke



In this Wednesday, June 21, 2017, photo, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, right, talks with Facebook group administrators Lola Omolola, left, Erin Schatteman, second from left, and Janet Sanchez during the Facebook Communities Summit, in Chicago, in advance of announcement of a new Facebook initiative designed to spur people to form more meaningful communities with Facebook's groups feature. (AP Photo/Nam Y. Huh)

At Facebook, mere "sharing" is getting old. Finding deeper meaning in online communities is the next big thing.

CEO Mark Zuckerberg is no longer satisfied with just connecting the world so that people can pass around baby pictures and live video—or fake news and hate symbols. So the Facebook founder wants to bring more meaning to its nearly 2 billion users by shepherding them into online groups that bring together people with common passions, problems and ambitions.

Much like the creation of Facebook itself—arguably the largest social-engineering project in history—that shift could have broad and unanticipated consequences. Facebook will apply the same powerful computer algorithms that make its service so compelling to the task of boosting membership in "meaningful" groups to more than a billion people within five years.

If successful, that would also encourage people to spend more time on Facebook, which could boost the company's profits. While Facebook doesn't currently place ads in its groups, it said it "can't speak to future plans." Advertising is virtually Facebook's only source of revenue ; it brought in almost \$27 billion dollars in 2016, 57 percent more than the previous year.

THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

The shift comes as Facebook continues to grapple with the darker side of connecting the world, from terrorist recruitment to videos of murder and suicides to propaganda intended to disrupt elections around the world. For Zuckerberg, using his social network to "build community" and "bring the world closer together"—two phrases from Facebook's newly updated mission statement—is a big part of the answer.

"When you think of the social structure of the world, we are probably one of the larger institutions that can help empower people to build communities," Zuckerberg said in a recent interview at the company's offices in Menlo Park, California. "There, I think we have a real opportunity to help make a difference."



In this Wednesday, June 21, 2017, photo, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg speaks at the Facebook Communities Summit, in Chicago, in advance of an announcement of a new Facebook initiative designed to spur people to form more meaningful communities with Facebook's groups feature. (AP Photo/Nam Y. Huh)

Zuckerberg outlined his latest vision at a "communities summit" held Thursday in Chicago. It's the company's first gathering for the people who run millions of groups on Facebook, a feature the company rolled out years ago to little fanfare. Facebook is also rolling out new

administrative tools intended to simplify the task of screening members and managing communities in hopes that will encourage people to create and cultivate more groups.

COME TOGETHER

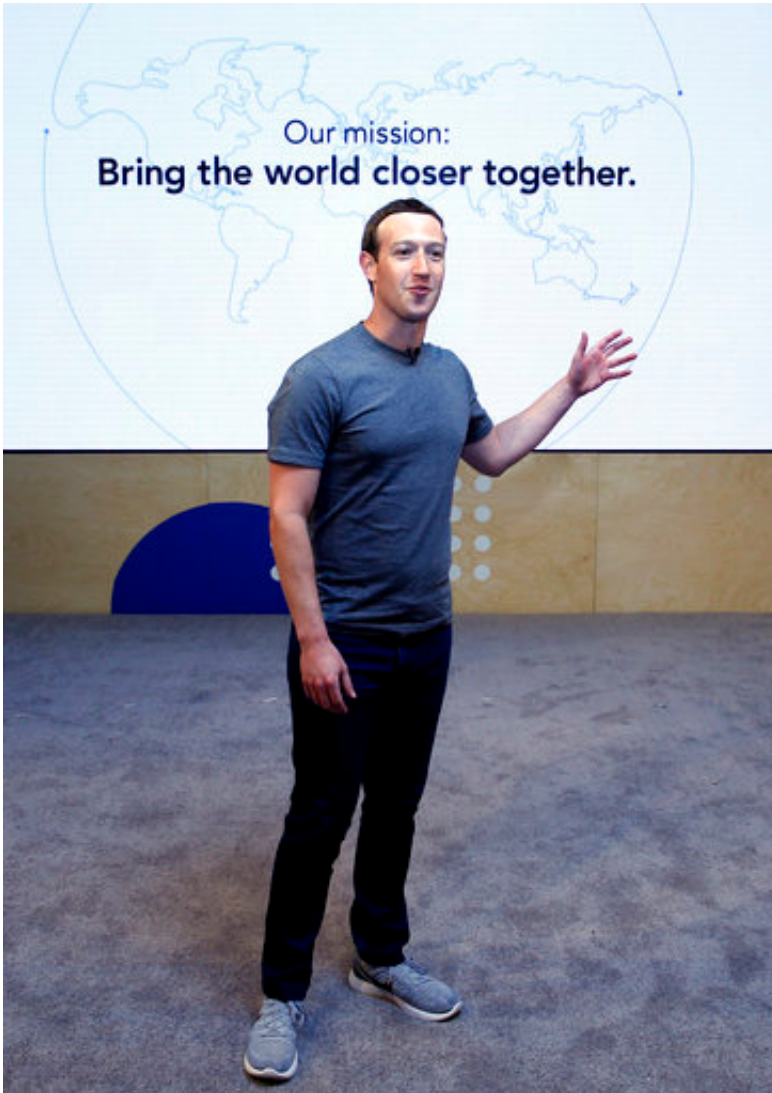
Facebook groups are ad hoc collections of people united by a single interest; they offer ways to chat and organize events. Originally conceived as a way for friends and family to communicate privately, groups have evolved to encompass hobbies, medical conditions, military service, pets, parenthood and just about anything else you could think of.

To Zuckerberg, now 33, the effort to foster meaningful communities reflects his recent interest in ways Facebook can make the world a less divisive place, one that emerged following the fractious 2016 presidential election.

He has previously talked about the need to bring people together in both a lengthy manifesto published earlier this year and during his commencement address at Harvard University last month.

"MEANING," FACEBOOK STYLE

Data-driven to its core, Facebook has quantified "meaning" so it can be sure people are getting more of it. And what Facebook aims to maximize is the time people spend in its online groups. Whenever someone spends at least 30 minutes a week in a group, Facebook classifies it as "meaningful." The company estimates that 130 million of its users are in such groups; it aims to boost that to over a billion by 2022.



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Facebook has already been tweaking its algorithms to recommend more groups to users. Those changes have increased the number of people in "meaningful" groups by 50 percent over the past six months, Zuckerberg said—a testament to the power of algorithms on human behavior.

Of course, anything that keeps people coming back to Facebook also gives it more opportunities to learn about their interests and other personal details that help it sell advertising, according to analysts.

"It's really simple economics: If users are spending time on Facebook, they're seeing more ads," said eMarketer analyst Debra Williamson. "Increasing user engagement is a necessity for Facebook."

COMMUNITY COLLAGE

Virtual communities "can fill a fundamental need we have for a sense of belonging, much like eating or sleeping," said Anita Blanchard, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte who's studied them for 20 years.

Her research has also shown that online communities can make people less intolerant of opposing viewpoints. "They get you out of your own clothes and make connections across the U.S., making you realize you can get along with people with different beliefs," she said.

For Sarah Giberman, an artist and parent who lives in Arlington, Texas, a meaningful group is one "that serves a need in your life, that fills some space that would otherwise feel vacant."

"I spend a lot more time on Facebook because of the groups than I would otherwise," she said. "Especially with the current sociopolitical climate, I'm not comfortable being very open in my regular newsfeed."

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