

Getting Some Face(book) Time

My Montreal friend Tony Pompeo (not his real name) was making his way home from work the other evening – and if you checked his Facebook profile, you could follow along with him:

10:57 PM: Tony is at Bonaventure Metro.

11:25 PM: Tony is almost home.

11:28 PM: Tony is walking down the street.

Facebook is a fast-growing social networking site that allows users to post photos and information about themselves, join networks related to geography, schools, or workplaces, and participate in online groups dedicated to just about anything you can imagine.

Tony had just discovered Facebook's mobile features and was – as he would admit – overdoing it as he used his cellphone to keep updating his page.

Facebook, which had 19 million active users as of April, used to be available only to students. But it recently opened up to the general population (leading to the formation of groups such as “Help!!! Old People Are Invading Facebook!”). The site is especially popular in Canada, with Canadians making up about 10% of users.

Here's how Facebook works. To access the site at all, you need to register (it's free). Once you've registered, you can search for people you know, and then ask them to be your “friends.” When you are friends with someone on Facebook, you can see their profile, along with the information about themselves they've chosen to post. You can also receive updates on their “status” (what they are saying they are doing), see photos and links they've posted, and invite them to upcoming events.

Facebook is a great way to connect with friends. You can stay up-to-date on what old college roommates are up to, without having to email and ask. And in a rural area, it's a handy way to keep a far-flung group of current friends in the loop about local happenings.

Don't know who to invite as a Facebook friend? Joining a network (such as Halifax, Bridgewater High School, or Scotiabank), connects you with a group of people who have some kind of shared interest. In addition, there are user-created groups devoted to pretty much any topic imaginable. Local ones include “I'm From Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia and I'm Not Ashamed to Admit it”, “In Memory of Jillian Paige Snair” (for a local teen killed in a car crash in January), and “East St. Margarets Elementary School.”

Are there any negatives? Of course. For one, Facebook can be addictive. Do you really want to track down everyone from elementary school and add them to your friends? Then there's the privacy question. Facebook will ask you for all kinds of information when you register. But there is no obligation to provide it all. You could enter a fake name (there are eight Facebook users going by the name of heavy metal guitarist Zakk Wylde), but that defeats the purpose if you are hoping friends will find you.

Instead, keep it simple. My profile, for instance, is fairly minimal, and the date of birth I entered inaccurate. And when I want to communicate with friends directly, I use my own email address, not my Facebook mail. There is also no reason to accept Facebook's default privacy

settings. Instead, click the “Privacy” link and change your settings to a level you are comfortable with.

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