Google+ Changes Your World

June 30, 2011   By Miller Ramos

As usual, the Internet is hopping with activity as everyone's talking about Google's latest offering. The last couple of times it's been talk of Google Buzz, the Big G's answer to Twitter and their foray into the world of status updates and microblogging, and Google Wave, the Internet search giant's attempt at redefining the electronic communication paradigm and their approach to collaborative editing. This time, though? The talk is about Google+.

If you look around the web, you'll see that the vast majority of the talk regarding Google's new hotness addresses concerns and questions as they would relate to the business world. How can marketing agencies leverage the userbase of Google+ in order to effectively reach their target audience? How will Google+ affect those companies who have invested so much in their Facebook presence? How will Google+ affect a company's overall SEO strategy, if at all?

While those are all good questions, those questions pretty much only mean a whole lot to you if you're a business. Now, I don't know about you, but I'm not a business. I'm a person. In fact, I'm an end-user. But more to the point, I'm a designer. If anything, this means that I look at things the way other people would (or should). So how about an evaluation of this new app from a person's perspective?

As an interface designer, I have to say that I'm pretty impressed with their UI. It's clean and simple to navigate and, despite its minimalism, isn't boring to look at. You aren't bogged down with too many options and things that you may be looking for aren't buried layers and layers deep. Its one glaring failing is that it feels like it's lacking something. I suspect that that "something" is the content the application is meant to disseminate. Lacking the population of its innards (as the pool of people on Plus right now is pretty small), though, it remains a nicely presented framework that doesn't feel at all confining yet provides focus to the content that will eventually fill it. It's pretty clear that content will be the focus (and, no doubt, the strength) of this site.

Where Google+ Beats You-Know-Who

Two social features of Google+ that really stand out (as evident by their prominence on the site's Welcome page) are things that Facebook apparently lacks: one is called "Hangout" and the other is "Circles".

Hangout, plain and simple, is essentially a means to host video chats from within the framework of Plus, no doubt leveraging the video chat ability that Google Talk already has. It boasts that it can host a session of up to ten clients and, given the casual sort of language used to describe the feature, implies that it is as effortless as pinging your buddy over chat. Ya know, whenever. In fact, it's curious how despite being video conferencing rebranded as a fun enhancement to chat, Google+ steers clear from making the feature sound staid and at all business-oriented by not referring to it as video conference.

Circles, Google+'s method for handling your social connections, are groupings of people and levels of openness to the public that you set up. Aside from the standard hierarchy of Friends, Family, Acquaintances (people you've met but aren't close to), Following (people you follow but don't actually know, a la Twitter), and Blocked, you can make up your own circles however you want to define them (folks can show up in more than one of your circle) and throw whomever you like in them. Moreover, what circle people are put in is only visible to you. It's just for your (and your account management's) sake. To me, this is an all too apparent fix for interpersonal social drama management, something that Google no doubt identified being a problem Facebook seems to have. After all, just because you have an association of some sort with someone on a particular social networking site, it does not by any means communicate that you are in fact actual friends, no matter how that app labels it with the broadest of brushstrokes. It's refreshing to see that Friending someone on this particular web application may actually be closer to what "friend" actually means.

Better Privacy Too (Sorry Mark)

The versatility and prevalence of the use of circles in this social media app have led me to believe that the main crux that drove the development of Google+ is flexible and customizable privacy, a not so subtle nod to Facebook's notorious handling of user privacy. That said, pretty much EVERY FIELD EVER (from every individual tidbit of profile info, stuff

you share as well as how you want to handle gtalk) can be set to a custom privacy level as predetermined by the circles you select for them. Ahem. Each of them. Individually. Not that you have to go and alter the publicness of every single morsel of content you post on Google+; it's just that you can if you really, really want to. (And no doubt some folks will.) It's interesting to point out that the ability to alter your privacy or be informed of it is neither hidden in any way nor difficult to comprehend. Ironically, Google+ is very open with how they allow you to not be.

Content is King

It's pretty obvious that Google+ is Google boldly moving into the social media space. If Buzz was their awkward and gingerly-trying-out-the-social-media-waters first step in the veritable stylings of Twitter, Google+ is their more obvious cannonball splash into the social pool, Facebook style. The comparison between the two is undeniable and, really, expected, as Google is attempting to out-Facebook Facebook. However, an interesting thought occurred to me as I was exploring this new web app: Google+ seems less concerned about making social connections and exploring relationships between human beings than it is about the social sharing of content. To that end, not only does it stream content shared from the people you've added to your social network but it has a simple feed aggregator that streams in content ("sparks") that's relevant to your keyword-determined interests that you can then share. And before you ask, yes, this is essentially Facebook's Wall. And then some.

Learning From the Past

If anything, Google+ is an amalgam of myriad technologies already developed in Google apps outside of search (not that search isn't fully integrated throughout). The user experience offers constant reminders of Google Reader, Google Buzz, Google Latitude, Google Maps, Google Talk, Picasa and even GMail, all free and in the cloud. And that's just it: one of Google+'s biggest strengths that existing social media sites the likes of Facebook and otherwise can't begin to boast is that, already out-of-the-box, it features integration with a suite of applications. Namely, the Google Apps you already use. Even if you don't, Google+ will introduce you and a lot of other people to these offerings.

Net Atlantic Email Marketing Blog

Personally, I'm reminded of when Adobe acquired Macromedia back in the day. While Photoshop, Illustrator, Flash and Dreamweaver were all industry standard tools, before they were all under the banner of Adobe, they were all separate entities and disparate workspaces unto themselves. After they became Adobe products and had cross-functionality forged between them, it was like doors being opened. But in my head. So many opportunities presented themselves as any one particular application was now part of a much larger, cross-integrated whole. Now, given Google's track record with Buzz and Wave, no one knows for certain what future Google+ may have.

But one thing seems certain: Google+ may very well open some doors of its own.