

Social security

Will criticism of Facebook for leaking personal data lead to a backlash from users? By Suzy Bashford

As the posters for the Hollywood film about Facebook, *The Social Network*, read: 'You don't get to 500 million friends without making a few enemies.' However, with a barrage of bad press recently, commentators are starting to ask whether the growing ranks of Facebook critics could hamper the social network's growth.

The site's leaking of personal data is attracting some of the biggest criticism, after journalists reported that several of Facebook's most popular apps, such as Farmville, were revealing consumers' user ID numbers to advertisers.

While Facebook has already taken steps to clamp down on this kind of data-sharing, and plans to introduce new technical systems, it's clear that it believes the situation has been blown out of proportion.

Facebook defends its record and claims people are confused about the definition of personal information. 'User IDs are random and unique numbers used to identify individual profiles within Facebook's technical systems; they are not personal information,' says a spokeswoman for the company. 'The way the situation has been reported can be misleading, as it makes users think that if advertisers have access to these user IDs, they have access to everything. But they don't.'

If a user has applied privacy settings, then Facebook says the most advertisers will be able to see is a name and a photo. 'People don't understand that, when Facebook works with advertisers, the information those advertisers get is aggregated and anonymised,' adds the spokeswoman.

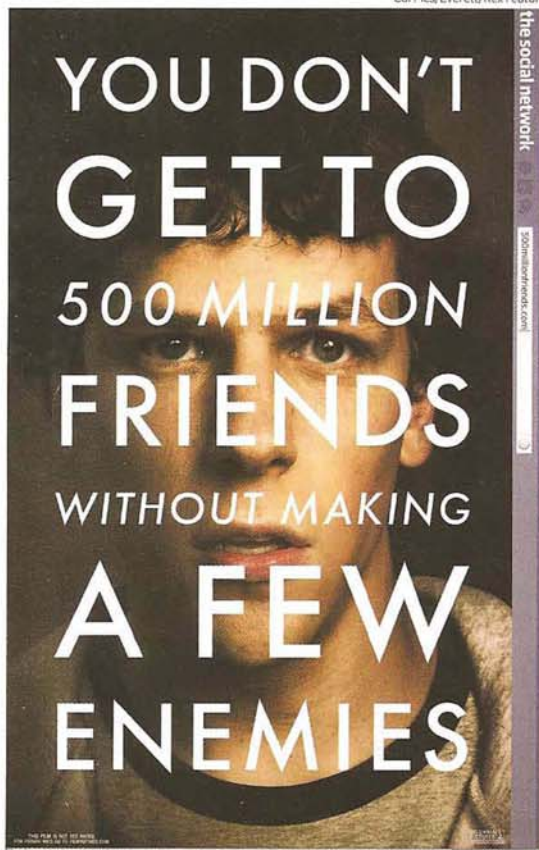
Riding the storm

While social networkers might be aware of the debate regarding privacy, raging mostly in tech circles, most experts do not believe that the growing body of bad press will lead to any meaningful consumer backlash.

'Facebook is one of those companies where customers' love of the product overrides concerns about the brand's other activities,' says Dr Dan O'Connor, head of research at social media agency RMM.

Similarly, O'Connor argues that even if Facebook is characterised as an 'anti-social network', it will not have any effect on future investment.

'[Facebook founder] Mark Zuckerberg has just been portrayed in a film that is a contender for an Oscar as a borderline sociopath with misogynistic tendencies, who cheats his friend out of his rightful share of the company. Yet investors are still queuing up at his door,' he says. 'The "anti-social" reputation may really just be



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code for "profit is our most important motive". As long as that remains, future growth – or at least investment – is assured.'

For some, the privacy issue is a distraction from the major issues affecting Facebook's status as a trusted media platform. Guy Levine, chief executive at digital agency Return on Digital, asserts that a 'far bigger concern is users and communities not wanting, and therefore not interacting with, the advertising there.'

For others, such as James Kirkham, managing director of digital agency Holler, the fatal threat to Facebook's future is its 'gargantuan size'. It is this, he says, rather than any privacy scandal, that is likely to bring about wide-scale negativity and a consumer backlash.

Many marketers have become complacent about Facebook and Twitter being practically synonymous with social networking. There's a general feeling that the age of fickle consumers, who would ditch Friendster for Friends

Reunited (remember them?) in a blink of an eye, are over.

Kirkham, however, warns that things can change quickly – and advertisers must be mindful of that. He contends that the consumer 'love-in' with Facebook cannot continue and the 'next big thing' is just around the corner.

'Yes, Facebook is huge. Yes, it has changed behaviour. Yes, it has a film about it. But all this doesn't stop the natural shift that sees people switching allegiance or finding an alternative for different reasons. It is likely that the first tribes to disappear will be the smart, savvy, early-adopting-technology pioneers.'

As soon as the younger generation hears about the next new thing, they'll jump on it, adds Kirkham. 'They will be desperate to find a new home away from Facebook where, not only their parents, but their grandparents, now spend time.'

Facebook fact file

- 54% of internet users are on Facebook.
- Facebook users are over a third more likely to feel that other people's blogs influence their own opinions.
- 32% of those aged 50-plus are Facebook users.
- 61% of Londoners are Facebook users, compared with 48% in Scotland.
- Facebook users are 26% more likely to be influenced by online ads, with regard to their purchases.
- 48% of Facebook users access mobile internet, compared with 34% of internet users as a whole.
- 74% of Facebook users are also YouTube users.
- 82% of full-time students are Facebook users.
- Facebook users are 31% more likely to have their purchase decisions influenced by celebrities.
- Facebook users are 23% more likely to believe that they buy new products before most of their friends.

The statistics are based on a group of adults who have been online in the past month. Source: Kantar Media's GB TGI Net 2010 (Q3)

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