

What **Facebook** Teaches Us About the Potential of Mobile Research Communities



by Greg Heist
Vice President,
Research Innovation & Technology
Gongos Research



“We had no idea that we would build a business that would shape the way people would become more transparent in sharing information ... I was just building something that would let me and the people around me stay in touch. And then it just kind of grew and grew.”

— Mark Zuckerberg (Newsweek, July 21, 2009)

Without question, the story of Facebook and its rapid rise from dorm room project to cultural icon is a fascinating one. But, it is more than just an example of the American Dream in action. It’s a reflection of the powerful cultural need for us to remain connected to, and identify with, friends and loved ones despite the frenzied pace of modern life.

However, beyond its cultural significance, I’d like to address two important implications of the Facebook phenomenon from a marketing research perspective. First, Facebook has gradually made all of us more comfortable with broadcasting details of our lives online, to a degree that would have been unsettling to the “Ike” generation. Secondly, we will look at how Facebook has paved the way for smartphones to become the baton that orchestrates the symphony of our lives.

The Evolution of Online Transparency

Facebook (and all social networking, really) is in large part defined and sustained by personal disclosure. We share significant events: the birth of children; the passing of loved ones; our children’s first words; a promotion at the office. We share mundane happenings: what we’re eating; what ballgame we’re at; a stray thought that crosses our mind; how many bags of leaves we just raked. We upload photos and videos, link to websites we like, and follow our favorite television shows. We play Farmville, figure out what Dr. Seuss character we are most like, endorse causes, organize events, and keep up with our favorite products and brands. In short, we disclose a lot about what is uniquely “us” with our extended set of friends—largely without concern for the privacy implications of this online transparency.

But, why is it that we as a culture are increasingly willing to tradeoff privacy for this type of disclosure? It may indeed be that it allows us to feel “known” in a unique way by our community of friends. And in turn, through our friends’ transparency, we “know” them better and, as a result, feel closer to them. This is a subtle—but emotionally powerful—driver that helps us feel less isolated in the whirlwind of our daily “to-dos” and more in touch with the rhythms of others’ lives.

It’s probably not coincidental that this cultural revolution was started by a member of Gen Y. I recently read a blog post by Andrew McAfee of the MIT Sloan School of Management that crystallized two unique elements of Gen Y’s values: Oversharing and Egalitarianism. I’d like to touch on not only how these distinctive Gen Y traits are playing out writ large in the social media space, but how they suggest an emerging theme for the future of marketing research.

Let’s start with the Gen Y tendency to overshare. If you have friends on Facebook under the age of 30, you know what I mean. The unfiltered play-by-play of their lives is at times so vivid, the question “what’s up” almost becomes irrelevant. From a marketing research perspective, this is almost like stepping into Nirvana, since capturing these kinds of minutiae can form the fabric of insights into consumers’ thoughts, motivations and behavior. While this is creating a new layer of information for which to mine, it also has given rise to a new framework by which researchers can directly ask the relevant questions.

One could say that Gen Y has paved the way for online research communities to explode on the scene, and holistically understand consumers in an entirely new way.

If the first trait speaks to the depth and breadth of what Gen Y shares, the second—egalitarianism—speaks to the forcefulness with which this generation gets its point across. Gen Y isn’t as enamored with hierarchy as it is with ideas and causes it deems meaningful. Individuals will speak their mind freely, even if it means being in conflict with the masses.

While this can be seen as brash and audacious, the perceived inherent value of their opinion is yet another potential boon to market research. As a focus group moderator, I want that kind of passion for ideas—even when the rest of the group feels the opposite. More broadly, this egalitarianism is bleeding out into the wider population, with people more unapologetically “being themselves.” At the end of the day, isn’t this exactly what we want to see as researchers?

It’s probably
not coincidental
that this
cultural
revolution was
started by a
member of
Gen Y.



NOVEMBER, 2010

Connected at the Hip Has a Whole New Meaning

Beyond transforming our collective comfort with online disclosure, Facebook has also blazed the trail for how we utilize smartphones for social networking. Recently, Facebook began publishing statistics about its mobile user base. I want to highlight a few of these statistics and what they imply for the future of mobile online research communities. The first is this: On a monthly basis there are more than 100 million users accessing Facebook through their smartphones, representing approximately 20% of all Facebook members worldwide.

Now, think about this statistic for a moment. Numbers of this magnitude represent far more than a "fringe element" or something that only early adopters do. To me, it implies that many people are already comfortable with the concept of participating in an online community via a smartphone. It's only a matter of time before it becomes commonplace.

Perhaps even more compelling for a researcher is this: People who participate in Facebook through their mobile devices are twice as active as non-mobile users. This makes sense,

since it's much easier to steal a snapshot or update a status "as it happens" when all they need to do is pull their phone out of their pocket. The real-time nature of participating via a smartphone naturally leads to deeper engagement than their non-mobile peers.



But, the story gets better. A.C. Nielsen projects that within 12 months, more people will be buying smartphones than feature phones in the U.S., quickly reaching a powerful tipping point that will have ramifications for the research industry for years to come.

As we looked at these statistics, it raised further questions in our mind. Namely, to what degree will smartphones encourage greater participation in research activities by consumers?

To begin our exploration, we fielded an activity among members of the Gongos Research Consumer Village who own smartphones. We asked them whether they were more or less likely to participate in research activities if given the opportunity to do so through their smartphone. Similar to an online community environment, we framed these "research activities" in terms of dialogues, flash polls and surveys. As we reviewed the results across generational groups, we found that Gen Y and Gen X members were significantly more likely to participate in research offered via their mobile devices than Baby Boomers.

These early findings are extremely promising, since they point to a future where mobile stands on equal footing with traditional online approaches.

Is the Future of Communities in the Palm of Our Hands?

From where I sit, the combined impact of these two cultural trends is too powerful to ignore. And it's so compelling, it caused us to take a fairly bold stand in our approach to mobile research. Rather than focus on SMS surveys and other feature phone-based methods, we embraced an approach that capitalizes on these cultural currents. Fundamentally, we believe that only smartphones can deliver a research experience that seamlessly fits into the lifestyles of the growing ranks of connected consumers.

As socially dynamic research communities become even more foundational in how companies connect to, and identify with, consumers, smartphones will play an integral role in ensuring communities become even more vivid reflections of consumers' lives. This is the guiding vision of i°Communities mobile, which we have initially developed for iPhone and iPod touch.

i°Communities mobile untethers community members from their computers, freeing them to contribute in ways that mobile social networking has paved the path for. While it clearly adds a new dimension to the research community experience, we believe the ramifications of this new channel into consumers' minds is yet to be fully felt.

Like any first-to-market product, we expect to learn a lot in the coming year. Currently, we're conducting pilot tests with clients to understand how they can best leverage this new research technology. The transition of consumers into mobile research communities is off to a strong start – thanks to the cultural shifts that the ubiquitous world of Facebook has put into motion.



About Greg:

Greg is responsible for guiding the innovation strategy at Gongos Research. From white-board concepts to product development, Greg and his team ensure that technology and innovation support a primary role – to make the research process more engaging for consumers and more meaningful and powerful for corporations. A practitioner and moderator with over 16 years of research under his belt, Greg is a visionary at heart. He believes we are in the midst of an evolution in the way we conduct research, and he plans to help pave the way.

As an industry speaker at events produced by the IIR & AMA and author published in Quirk's Marketing Research Review, Greg has examined how advanced platforms such as online research communities increase respondent engagement, while providing new avenues for corporations to understand consumers. He believes mobile applications will further converge consumers lives with immersive methods to engage them in marketing research.

Greg received his BS in Industrial Administration from Kettering University, and his MS in Humanistic and Clinical Psychology from the Michigan School of Professional Psychology.

He can be found blogging at <http://www.go-innovate.typepad.com/> or at gheist@gongos.com

NOVEMBER, 2010