Social Networking: Making the Connection to Generation Next

Sarah Taylor, Family and Consumer Sciences Agent

Introduction

The way generations communicate has changed over the years. Those belonging to Generation Next (born between 1982 and 2003), can't remember a time without computers, cell phones, digital music, and ever expanding technology. These individuals are referred to as digital natives. According to a 2007 study of young people in the United States, 97 percent of Next'ers own a computer, 94 percent own a cell phone, and they use them almost constantly to stay connected.

Individuals who belong to the Silent Generation (born between 1925 and 1945) and the Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) may favor face-to-face or phone communication rather than social media. These generations are considered digital immigrants. Digital immigrants think and access information differently. Examples of digital immigrant behavior are given by Marc Prensky, an author and speaker about generations and technology: instead of reading email on the computer screen, digital immigrants may print out their email to read it; instead of sharing a web link via email, the digital immigrant may ask a person to come see the Web page.

Even though they are not quite digital natives, Generation X, those born between the mid-1960s and 1981, use instant communication techniques such as email, texting, instant messaging (IM), and social networking websites to keep in touch with family and friends daily. According to the Huffington Post, in 2010, Facebook.com, a popular social networking site, was the most visited website, with almost 9 percent of all U.S. Web visits.

In the midst of these changes, digital immigrants may want to become more comfortable with Internet communication, including social networking sites, to help them stay in touch with Generation Next.

Social Networking: A History

Social networking sites are Web-based services that allow users to construct a public or semi-public profile within the service. Users share unique information through their profiles, including interests, hobbies, favorite music, and movies. Users may also display their own pictures or home movies. This information is then shared with others who use the website, especially family and friends who also belong to the site and the user's social network within the site. Users are not typically "networking," or looking to make new contacts, but instead are communicating with people they already know in person.

The first form of social networking was the BBS, or bulletin board system. These online meeting rooms allowed users to communicate with a central system where users could download files or games and even post messages to each other. These rooms were accessed over telephone lines via modem, and were often only available locally because long-distance charges applied. BBS continued to gain popularity into the early 1990s, before the Internet became mainstream.

The true pioneer of today's social networking sites may have been America Online (AOL). AOL members could create communities with searchable member profiles, a feature of the Web service that may have been the most commonly used predecessor to today's social networking websites.

In the early 2000s, many sites such as *classmates.com* and *SixDegrees.com* began as social networking sites that allowed users to connect with past and current friends. In the mid-2000s, sites such as MySpace, LinkedIn, and Facebook dominated social networking.

Need to Feel Connected

Demographic trends in retirement, dissolution of the traditional family, and increased geographic mobility often separate family members by distance. This separation can lead to social isolation and loneliness, which are closely related to negative health outcomes in older adults, whereas social support of various types and from various sources is associated with health in a positive way.

A study about older adults and social media by the Pew Research Center found that sharing photos, videos, and updates with family and friends regularly can provide valuable connections for older adults. Children and grandchildren of Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation share many of their daily activities through social media, which often replaces writing letters, sending emails, or even picking up the telephone. Older adults who use the same social media outlets — Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, or others — are able to view information posted by their family members and friends. Participation in social network websites may keep an older adult connected with family members and help promote positive health outcomes.

The Pew study found few other places — online or offline — where Generation Next, Generation X, Baby Boomers, and the Silent Generation could come together and regularly interact across the same network.

 Social networking users are also more likely to reconnect with people from their past. These renewed connections can be an important support network for people embarking on retirement. The Pew study also found that individuals suffering from chronic conditions were more likely to use social networking websites to blog or join discussions about living with chronic illness. This contact helped those users feel better about dealing with their condition.

Social Network Usage by Digital Immigrants

The Pew Research Center revealed that social network use of Internet users 50 and over increased from 22 percent to 42 percent in just one year. Email continues to be the primary way older users maintain contact with friends and family; however many users now also rely on social media for daily communication.

Stay Safe on Social Networking Sites

As with any social encounter, consider safety first. Here are some tips:

- Be aware of scams that target social networking channels.

- Maintain privacy settings on sites.

- Users should provide little or no private information in their profiles. Criminals can use that information to gain trust or obtain your identity data.

- Don't open emails or attachments from people you don't know: Malware attachments can steal your identity, infect your computer with a virus, or send spam from your account.

- Never wire anyone money from an instant message or inbox message on social media. It's likely someone has stolen information and is using a trusted name to scam you.

- Never give out financial information, such as bank account, credit card, or social security numbers.

- When redirected to another login page, check the browser for the site name, such as facebook.com or twitter.com. To prevent a phishing attack, leave the site immediately if something different is in the address field.

- Click at your own risk. If it seems suspicious don't click it.

- Be careful about giving out cellphone numbers. Without realizing it, you may get entered into a text messaging service or an app that bills you a monthly fee.

- Don't fall for something too good to be true, such as "Tweeting for cash — earn money for tweets."

- Don't pay for free trials or give your credit card number for access to a trial — you could be charged for something you never intended to purchase.

(source: seniorcarecorner.com, adapted with permission)

One in five older adults reported using a social networking site on a typical day in 2010, up 10 percent from 2009. In addition 13 percent of users over 65 reported using a social networking website on a typical day, up from only 4 percent in 2009.

A study performed by the University of Wisconsin examined social network use by older adults. Of the 124 adults ages 60 to 90 interviewed for the study, 44 percent reported using a social network website at least occasionally. Those who used the site regularly said it met their goals of communicating with family and friends. More value was placed on using the website because it helped them maintain connections with the family and friends.

Other factors that played a role in social networking use were ease of use, trust of the website, and social pressures. The study found that older adults may not use social network sites if friends and family aren't already using the site.

To encourage older adults to use social networking websites, AARP (*http://aarp.org/*) and Project GOAL (*http://the projectgoal.org/goal/*) have been actively promoting social media resources that are relevant for mature users. The Federal Communications Commission has also requested additional funding from Congress to invest in training programs where volunteers are trained to teach digital skills to those who are least connected in their community. The program includes pairing tech-savvy digital natives with seniors.

Social Networking Websites

Facebook is now the most popular social networking site in the United States, with more than 165 million users nationwide, according to statistics from the social networking site. Of those, almost 63 million are under 25, and only 10 million are over 55. Fifty percent of all Facebook users log on to Facebook in any given day. Facebook users worldwide spend 700 billion minutes on the site each month! More than 200 million people use Facebook mobile, an application that allows them to interact on their cell phones. Those who use Facebook mobile are twice as active as those who only use Facebook on a computer. Because Facebook has so many users, it is possible many of an older adult's family and friends may already have an account.

New social networking sites also have been created to cater to older adults. These include Eons (*www.eons.com*), Growing Bolder (*www. growingbolder.com*), and *Eldr.com*.

Joining a Social Network

Once an individual joins a social networking website, he or she is asked to fill out forms asking several questions. Answers to these questions develop the user profile, which typically includes information such as age, location, and an "about me" section where the user describe interests and hobbies.

References and Resources:

Nickson, Christopher (2009). *The History of Social Networking. http://www.digitaltrends. com/features/the-history-of-social-networking/*

Taylor, Mark. (2010). *Working with the Generations. http://www.taylorprograms. com/images/Workplace_handout_10.pdf*

Huffington Post (2010). *Facebook Tops Google as Most Visited Website of the Year. http:// www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/12/30/ Facebook-tops-google-as-m_n_802606.html*

Senior Care Corner (2011). *Seniors Connecting on Social Media: Tips to Stay Safe. http:// seniorcarecorner.com/seniors-connecting-on-social-media-tips-to-stay-safe*

Mary Madden (2010). *Older Adults and Social Media. http://www.pewinternet.org/ Reports/2010/Older-Adults-and-Social-Media. aspx*

Prensky, Marc (2001). *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants. On the Horizon.* NCB University Press, Vol. 9 No. 5, October 2001 *http://www. marcprensky.com/*

Braun, Michael T., Van Swol, Lyn (2010). *Social Media Adoption in Older Adults*, University of Wisconsin

Boyd, D.M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), article 11. *http://jcmc. indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html*

Junco, Reynol; Mastrodicasa, Jenna (2007). *Connecting to the Net. Generation: What Higher Education Professionals Need to Know About Today's Students.* National Association of Student Personal Administrators

Tomaka, Joe, Thompson, Sharon, & Palacios, Rebecca (2006). The Relation of Social Isolation, Loneliness, and Social Support to Disease Outcomes Among the Elderly. *Journal of Aging and Health,* vol. 18, no. 3, June 2006

Most sites also encourage users to upload a profile photo to make it easier for others to ensure they've found the right person.

Visibility of profiles varies by the social networking site used. Some are searched by *google.com*, *bing.com,* or *msn.com*, which makes them visible to anyone. Other sites control what people can see based on the settings of the website or the user's privacy settings. Other sites allow anyone in the "social network" to see a user's profile. The social network may include the college the user attended or a former employer.

After joining, users are encouraged to identify others in the system with whom they have a relationship. The label for these relationships varies by site — popular terms include "Friends," "Contacts," and "Fan." Most sites do require a two-way confirmation in order to establish these online relationships, meaning one user "requests" another user to accept the network relationship, and the requested user must manually accept the request. Once a relationship has been created, each party has access to the entire profile of the other. Social networks also include both public and private methods of communication between "Friends."

Reviewers

Tonya Bronleewe, Agriculture and Natural Resources Agent, K-State Research and Extension – Sedgwick County

Debra Sellers, Ph.D, Adult Development and Aging Specialist, K-State Research and Extension; Assistant Professor, School of Family Studies and Human Services, Kansas State University

K-STATE
Research and Extension

Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service