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# A newbie's guide to Facebook

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**April 01, 2008** (Computerworld) There's a lot of buzz about Facebook, but what is it, exactly? What does it do? Can anybody join? How much does it cost?

In this article, I'll give you the basics of joining Facebook and what you can expect to find there. I'll explain the opportunities and services available for businesses and for individuals, based on my experience as a newbie who recently joined.

Until I became a member, I didn't really know what Facebook was. A friend of mine had told me that he met his fiancée on Facebook. Another friend said she gets together with her friends from all over the city on Facebook every Thursday from 7 to 9 p.m. Then I overheard a colleague at work say that he'd been looking for his high school girlfriend for years and, just recently, found her on Facebook, living in Scotland with her deceased husband's family.

All these things left me confused. At first, I believed Facebook was an online dating service, then I thought it was a chat room and then a worldwide phone directory. Then another colleague told me that members could advertise anything imaginable -- from skiing to skydiving to skeet shooter's clay pigeons -- on the Facebook Marketplace, for free. That sold me. I signed up that very day.



The home page lists many of the features available after you join.

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## About Facebook

Facebook was launched in February 2004 by a young Harvard student named Mark Zuckerberg. It started out as a sort of virtual campus hangout for Ivy League students, but quickly expanded from the university to the universe, and now anyone 13 or older can join.

It's growing quickly across the globe (250,000 people become members every day) with new sites in Spanish, German and, soon, in French.

It's also gaining on the more established social networking site MySpace. Forrester Research Inc. analyst Jeremiah Owyang says, "We predict that the total registered users of Facebook will eclipse the total amount of MySpace users in Q4 of 2008 but, even with that said, MySpace and Facebook will coexist, because they both serve different purposes to different audiences."

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See how Facebook has responded to privacy complaints and how you can take charge of its privacy control

settings.

According to Owyang, Facebook is more of a lifestyle site. That is, like the college campuses where it was launched, Facebook has become a central networking hub where its members can connect and share, in spite of their busy lives. Its largest, growing audience is the 35+ crowd. MySpace tends to attract the younger social surfers who are more media conscious and therefore flock to MySpace's "bands and brands" multimedia options, which include various forms of artistic self-expression.

## Joining Facebook

Joining Facebook is, literally, as easy as 1-2-3.

1. Go to [Facebook.com](http://Facebook.com) and create a UserID (your e-mail address), password and birth date (all three are mandatory fields). Notice that the Sign Up dialog box on the home page says: Sign up for Facebook. It's free and anyone can join. (So, that answered my questions about who could join and how much it costs.)
2. Next, type in a security code (a Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart or CAPTCHA; you know, one of those strings of jumbled up, curvy letters that look like shorthand on a roller coaster).
3. Then, Facebook says: You will get an e-mail shortly telling you how to confirm your account. The e-mail provides a link back to Facebook that, when activated, takes you back to the program to begin the ride.

### First things first

There were so many features available, I wanted to hurriedly search through them all so I could determine which ones might apply to me and my interests.

I quickly noticed, however, that until you join a network (centered around your city, job, high school or college), and complete a profile, you can't really get much information.

So I went back to the home page and started over.

If you follow certain steps in order (right after you join), Facebook attempts to identify your circle of friends and colleagues by asking you to list your local city, place of work, college, high school and various e-mail accounts such as Gmail, Yahoo and Hotmail.



Your profile asks for information such as college, high school, city of residence and company you work for.

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If all your connections are in one area, just select the Find Friends button. If your job is one state, college in another and high school in another (as in my case), Facebook takes the information you provided and selects the top three areas, then prompts you to choose the place you identify with most. At this point, you are then invited to "join a network."



Facebook gives you options for which network to join, based on your profile.

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### Find friends

Once you join a network, select Find Friends and, in seconds, Facebook generates pages filled with people in your area. My network in Salt Lake City has more than 75,000 members. So I started browsing randomly through hundreds of screens of happy faces, all of which display names, network, city and a series of options you can choose, such as send message, poke (which is the Facebook way of tapping someone and saying "hi, what's up, thinking about you."), view their friends or add their friends to your own friends list. You can also use the Sort Method box to narrow your search by sex, age, relationship status, political views and so on.



Facebook finds potential friends for you by various means, including checking out your e-mail accounts.

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The best thing about this method of "finding friends" is that you can browse through hundreds of member profiles anonymously. You can see what old friends and colleagues are doing -- such as looking up an old sweetheart or finding out what happened to an old college professor -- without committing to anything. Curiosity, however, doesn't always result in personal contact, because, like so many others in this country, I work all the time. But when I read that an old friend of mine had lost her mother to cancer, I did send her a message and a [Facebook gift](#). Now I find that I surf my "friends" network several times a week.



You can find a lot of information by browsing all networks without having to join them.

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Another great benefit is the option to "Browse All Networks," all over the world. You can't join them all, because Facebook only allows full access to one network at a time, although you can change networks twice every 60 days. But even without full access, you can search for friends in other cities or countries, see postings of local events, browse the local marketplace, join groups and read the local discussion boards or bulletin boards. That's a lot of access for a network visitor.



The mobile phone option lets you stay on top of things from just about anywhere.

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My favorite feature, however, is that I can access Facebook from my BlackBerry, which means I can check messages, listen to new music and view my friends' photos from just about anywhere, even on the plane when I'm traveling (which means I'm having fun instead of stressing about air pockets and downdrafts).

So, what is Facebook? It's all those things mentioned above and more. It's an online dating service; a chat room; a worldwide phone directory; an e-mail account; a photo, video and file-sharing warehouse (with unlimited file storage); a place to join or create new clubs or social forums (called Groups); a personal bulletin board (called the Wall); a social calendar (called Events); free advertising in the Marketplace; personal blogs (called Notes); a voter registration service; and even more.

## Creative business solutions

In this case, more means lots of creative opportunities for businesses, bands and other groups and

organizations. For example, with Facebook's social ads, members can create a home page "Sponsored Story" where businesses can promote their products and/or services through the news feed feature, which provides continual updates about what a user's friends are doing. And expanding on that function is the Facebook "Sponsored Group," where businesses can "message blast" registered group members through Facebook's internal e-mail system.

In addition, companies can create mini Web sites (called Facebook pages) where companies, bands, celebrities and politicians can design custom profiles for their business or career. It's sort of like an online brochure/résumé/advertisement of your products, services and skills.

Other business opportunities include the Facebook developer's platform (for companies that want to [build applications to interface with Facebook](#)) and the Facebook polls for statistical analysis and demographics. Here's a blog that [discusses more business possibilities](#).

And here's a look at [Facebook vs. LinkedIn: Which is better for business?](#)

## Problems

But the site has had its share of controversy. Last month, Facebook [responded to user protests](#) and made it easier for members to delete their accounts and all associated data.

It earlier took a lot of heat for its advertising tracking service called Beacon that many deemed to be too intrusive into users' privacy. In December, Facebook responded to the criticism and [let users turn off the feature](#).

In 2006, Facebook was widely lambasted for its news feed component, also because of privacy concerns. [Zuckerberg apologized](#) and instituted better privacy controls.

## Security/Privacy

A timeline of *Computerworld* articles demonstrates the breadth of security/privacy issues that have haunted Facebook. For a look at privacy controls Facebook has implemented, read this accompanying article: [A guide to privacy controls in Facebook](#).

- Nov. 9: [New Facebook ad system raises privacy concerns](#)
- Nov 30: [Facebook's Beacon more intrusive than earlier thought, CA says](#)
- Dec. 3: [Beacon's user tracking extends beyond Facebook, CA says](#)
- Dec 3: [Facebook's Beacon just the tip of the privacy iceberg](#)
- Dec 5: [Facebook caves in to Beacon criticism](#)
- Dec. 7: [Facebook doesn't budge on Beacon's broad user tracking](#)
- Dec. 10: [Facebook partners quiet on Beacon privacy brouhaha](#)
- Dec. 10: [Facebook Fiasco May Lead to Closer Look at Online Privacy Issues](#)
- Dec 14: [Disgruntled Facebook users look to get disabled accounts reactivated](#)
- Feb. 13: [Facebook bends to user protests, makes it easier to delete accounts](#)

Michael Greene, an analyst at JupiterResearch LLC, says the news feed program has developed into one of the site's better features, especially for businesses. "By allowing users to quickly scan their friends' updates, it has helped turn Facebook into a daily addiction for many users and allowed Facebook to develop innovative browsing options such as its iPhone application."

In each case, Facebook acted to address member complaints. Greene says Facebook "has a tremendous track record for considering their members and responding to their needs."

Facebook's strength, Greene notes, is its ability to link people together in networks, whether geographically based or centered around a school or employer, and provide a fun, highly usable communications platform for friends within these networks.

And the site is continuing to evolve and build on that strength. Recently it [rolled out new privacy controls](#) that determine who gets to see members' data, and announced it was developing an online chat service.

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