

Social Networks All the Rage, but Know the Risks

By Sam McDonald

RISMEDIA, March 30, 2009-(MCT)-People will say you've got to use Twitter, an Internet social networking tool that's currently all the rage.

"Come on. Everybody's doing it," they'll tell you.

These are the same people - friends, co-workers, relatives - who earlier twisted your arm to join other networking platforms such as Facebook, MySpace and Friendster.

Dan Costa isn't one of them. As executive editor for PCMag.com, he's well-versed in social networking technology. He's also a devoted Twitter user, but he doesn't proselytize.

Instead, he wants people who decide to try out services like Twitter, Facebook, MySpace and Friendster to appreciate their power - for both good and bad.

Costa warned that many people don't understand that sharing too much personal information can lead to serious consequences, and this goes for any social networking site.

"The thing that's so unusual about Facebook, is that it seems so personal," Costa said.

"Some of the information you are sharing is so personal, that it makes people say, 'Wait a minute. What information is out there?' The answer a lot of times is a lot more than you are aware of."

"The rules have changed, and it's not just about social networking anymore," he said.

"Right now, online, anything you do is being recorded. That's the default position you have to take, whether you're blogging or using Twitter or even sending an e-mail, you have to assume that it will live forever. That's a fundamental shift in how we view our privacy."

What's more, social networking sites might be the least dangerous. By their very nature, users can share their complaints and push those who control the sites to make changes. Social networking services tend to be more open than many other online enterprises, said Costa. Any time you make a purchase over the Internet, for example, someone is probably compiling information about you.

"The information is moving whether you know it or not," Costa said. "The thing about social networking is it tends to be more public, more out in the open. But people who aren't used to using instant messaging, or Twitter, or Web pages and blogs, still think of it as a little like letter writing or talking to friends.

"It's very different when you publish something and it's out there for the entire world to see. Many times you can't really take it back."

Setting aside its dangers, Costa does believe that social networking is here to stay. He cites a statistic from a Pew Internet & American Life Project survey that said 11% of online American adults use Twitter or some other service that allows users to share short updates about themselves - called "tweets" in the Twitter universe. "That's a pretty remarkable number," Costa said, noting that the figure includes both Twitter and Facebook users. "I think Twitter's audience is a little smaller than that full 11 percent. But certainly, it's really picking up now."

He said that Twitter's audience is changing as it grows. It's fast becoming less of an insiders' club.

"Twitter used to be very elite, very edgy," Costa said. "Technology enthusiasts, investors and so forth were getting together on it. Now it's much more mainstream. The audience still

tends to be younger, more connected, more into wireless technologies, heavier cell phone users. They're pretty much your average early adopters."

Significantly, users have found ways to use Twitter that extend well beyond describing what they ate for lunch or the television show they're watching. "The interesting thing about Twitter is that it's really just a tool like any other medium, like e-mail or chats, or instant messaging," Costa said. "You can use it for whatever you want to use it for." (NOTE: Realtors must comply with code of ethics rules.)

Social networking services like Twitter and Facebook do represent an important change in the way in which Americans communicate, Costa said. "We've never been in the place we are right now," he said. "There's usually nothing proprietary about the technologies, and if there is, there's always the chance that something else could rise up and replace it. The difference now, is that there is huge scale. There are more people than ever who are actually using these networking sites."

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