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## Did Facebook Unfriend Me?

By *mark.gimein*

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The site has found a business model—and forgotten its users.

 [100706\\_TBM\\_facebookARTICLE.jpg](#) [1]

What is Facebook, and why am I on it? It seems like a silly question to ask at this stage in the game, doesn't it? Facebook is a social networking platform, and I am on it because everyone else is on it. Until a couple of months ago, those answers were plenty good enough for me.

Over the last weeks, though, wherever I go on the Internet—including *The Big Money*—I am confronted with the ubiquitous buttons telling me to “share” this or that on Facebook, or “log on” using Facebook. Until a few months ago, I thought I had a pretty good idea of what the site was about: communicating with people I knew.

But now it seems to be everywhere—and I'm a lot less clear on what it's doing for me. When I log on, I see a stagnant service with a host of usability issues, a “news feed” governed by an impenetrable algorithm, and an aversion to adding new features. I understand a lot better now how Facebook can turn its millions of users into a way to make loads of money. But I'm confused about just what it's giving us in return.

In its early incarnation, Facebook was an unusually protean creation. Two years ago, when I told new users about the site, it was common for them to ask what exactly it was for—and I had trouble coming up with a good answer.

“It's really all about dating, right?” one friend asked me skeptically when I told him he should join. Well, no, I said, though, yes, it could be used for dating. Or, umm, for [playing Scrabble](#) [2]. Or for engaging in vampire battles. Or for finding books you could be interested in. It was a kind of parallel Internet.

Facebook was unusual because there was no clear path to “monetizing” its service—and no one quite knew what the service was. But still, people joined because others joined, and eventually it attained a critical mass, and eureka, it finally made sense. It was a platform for staying in touch with everyone you knew. A lot of the old Facebook fell by the wayside, but that was OK (well, OK except for the people who joined the “[1,000,000 Against The New Facebook](#) [3]” group on ... yes, Facebook) because the bigger Facebook grew, the more useful that basic function of communicating with your “friend” network became.

Which brings us to today. Now the number of active participants around the world has grown to nearly 500 million—or about one in five Internet users. In the United States, where Facebook's growth [may finally have](#)

[plateaued](#) [4], the site has 120 million users—two out of five people are regular Facebookers.

Not only is Facebook huge, but it has a unique property that distinguishes it from, say Yahoo Mail—another service with hundreds of millions of frequent users. Each Facebook account is tied to an actual person.

“On the Internet,” as a famous [New Yorker cartoon](#) [5] put it, “nobody knows you’re a dog.” But that was before Facebook. Now everybody knows you’re a dog—and, moreover, when you sign on you’re the same adorable mutt that was online before. This creates an irresistible value proposition: With its mass, Facebook can act as the assurer of identity for sites across the Web. Every site that asks you to “sign in with your Facebook account” can now feel certain that its “user” is a real person.

It’s easy to see the advantages of this for all the Web sites that want you to connect via Facebook. They can now deal with actual people, whom they can e-mail, track, and market to, instead of a flood of anonymous “users” reluctant to register for yet another site.

Looking down the road, I have a pretty good idea of what’s in it for Facebook. On the Internet, he who controls the log-in controls the wallet. Every user who signs on to a bunch of other sites via Facebook is a potential customer—someone who might pay for goods or subscriptions, probably with a credit card on file with Facebook. As [Apple](#) [6] (AAPL) is to the app store, Facebook can be to a substantial part of the Web. That, far more than the [\\$800 million Facebook took in](#) [7] from advertising last year, is the big prize.

But what’s in this for me? In a recent article, my fellow *TBM* writer Kevin Kelleher wrote about Facebook’s [ever-present “like” buttons](#) [8] and asked, “What’s in it for users?” Why should users care about telling Facebook’s advertisers which ads they like? For me, though, the question is broader. I’m less bothered by Facebook’s efforts to endear itself to sponsors than I am by the *absence* of effort to make the service better for users.

One striking thing about Facebook for me is how feature-poor it is. Facebook is a young company that has had to contend with mega-growth. Every change is scrutinized by its millions of users—plus class-action lawyers, regulators, and professional privacy watchdogs. I get that.

Even taking that into account, though, I remain surprised by how little Facebook has done to expand its range.

Consider Facebook’s e-mail system. There is no way to sort the mail, to divide it into the (many) messages from the groups I’ve joined and the (few) from actual people. There is no way that I can see to forward messages. And not even a way to go back through old messages quickly. It is vastly inferior to just about any other e-mail system.

The same pattern of neglect extends through much of Facebook. For most users, as Caitlin McDevitt [has pointed out](#) [9] on *TBM*’s Facebook Status blog, the site is a mismatched and impenetrable amalgam of disparate social groups. The limited system Facebook has for sorting all of one’s friends is kludgy. Yes, if you make sure to slot each new friend into a “group,” you have some control over what each segment of your friend list sees. But if you haven’t done that along the way, the process is daunting.

Meanwhile, instead of giving me simple controls to manage this, Facebook has actually gone backwards, using a mysterious algorithm to select the updates I might like to read in my “News Feed.” The algorithm doesn’t work, and there is no obvious system (such as letting me mark the friends whose updates I want to see) to make it better. There’s no easy way to kill the news feed and default to seeing everything. Even cycling through the list of

updates is slow and buggy. (Try clicking on a long update to read the whole thing, then returning to the same place.)

With each iteration of Facebook, I sense that I am getting less. One explanation proposed for Facebook's slowed growth in the United States is that its users are concerned about privacy. What is making me turn away, though, is not the worry that Facebook's collecting information and sharing what I do online. Given the number of lawyers, regulators, and professional privacy watchdogs breathing down its neck, it seems to me that Facebook may well become the Fort Knox of personal data.

All the prompts to "sign in using Facebook" bug me because they're a constant reminder of a corporate reinvention—in which the service that I signed up for is starting to feel like an afterthought. Virtually every other online service bombards us with more features—check out, for instance, Yahoo's online photo editing (there is still no tool to edit the photos you upload to Facebook) and large file transfer services. Facebook, meanwhile, spins its wheels.

There have been [other attempts](#) [10] at building a worldwide system to manage online identities. In the main they have failed, because they have asked users for a lot, while offering them little in exchange for opting in. Facebook wants me to use "sign in with Facebook" all over the Web. If it gives me reason to keep coming back to its core service, that's fine. But if the site I joined stagnates, no thanks. I have a pretty good idea of what Facebook wants from me. I just want Facebook to remember what it was that I wanted from it.

**Author:**

[Mark Gimein](#) [11]

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