

Google+ Holds Promise But Remains Weak On Usage

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Despite unique features for users and marketers, and built-in name recognition, Google's social network still struggling for relevance

In the second half of 2011, after months of speculation about whether and how Google would finally "get" social, the search giant rolled out Google+ to great fanfare.

For tens of millions of users of other Google products, there was little obstacle to joining the new social network. But in spite of its fast growth in user numbers, the service has not enjoyed the stickiness of other top social media properties.

comScore reports, for example, that average time users in the US spent on the social networking site was down to 3.3 minutes in January 2012, from 5.1 minutes in November of last year.

"Google+ has seen millions of users sign up for the site since its July 2011 launch," said Kimberly Maul, eMarketer writer/analyst and author of the new report, "Google+: Influencing the Integration of Search and Social." "However, engagement and participation aren't up to speed with other social networks, and that has become a major obstacle for turning Google+ into a relevant social network."

Even with activity on Google+ low and in decline as its novelty wears off, the social network can still have an impact on Google users as they visit other Google properties, especially as they search. The unveiling of Search Plus Your World in early 2012 raised eyebrows among some privacy advocates worried that Google was integrating personal information in unexpected ways, and it also surprised some search users with results that seemed less useful than before.

A searcher logged in to Google who had signed up to Google+ and added a few people to Circles might not be actively using the social network anymore, but if that user's connections were active, their +1s and Picasa photo albums had a sudden and unexpected prominence in their search results.

This effect "along with a need to claim a brand-name page before someone else does" can make Google+ difficult for marketers to ignore. And the service does have many differentiating elements, including some that set it apart from the current top social sites.

In March 2012, eMarketer collected information about the top features that brands can use on Google+, including Circles, Hangouts and Direct Connect.

But though those brand pages offer marketing opportunities not available from competitors like Facebook, putting dollars toward Google+ before usage levels increase will remain a tough sell.

The full report, "Google+: Influencing the Integration of Search and Social," also answers these key questions:

- How many people are using Google+?
- How have marketers begun to use the site's offerings?
- How does Google+ interact with other Google products, including search?

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