

First Thoughts On Google+ and PR

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A friend invited me to join Google+ (<https://plus.google.com/>) in its beta stage. My first impression was that social medium is cleaner in design than Facebook but also empty. There were only two other people I knew in the initial recommendation. The software has a long way to go to become a social medium of value to PR, but on the other hand, Google said at the time of writing that it had gathered 10 million users in its first two weeks who were sharing more than a billion items across the network daily. That was subsequently revised by analysts to 18 to 20 million users in the first three weeks. Still, that is a long way from Facebook's 750 million users, so there is a mountain for Google+ to climb to compete effectively with Facebook.

Google doesn't have to look far to see what happens to second-ranked social media. It need only look at MySpace, the service News Corp purchased for \$580 million in 2005 and sold for \$35 million in 2011, and Friendster, a defunct social medium site. Google has resources to stay the course, but that isn't the point. As critics have noted, who needs another social medium? What does Google+ have that Facebook doesn't? This is a question communicators and marketers will ask as well as they decide whether to build a presence on Google+ in addition to Facebook, leave Facebook for Google+ or ignore Google+. It is interesting, for example, that one of the few corporations on Google+ -- Ford Motor -- prominently labels its page (<https://plus.google.com/114277687548103339609/posts>) as a "Test Account." It is also evidence of the distance that Google+ has to go that Ford Motor had 9,600 people following it there at the time of writing while on Facebook, Ford Motor had 772,000. While it is too early to forecast how Google+ will do as a social medium, there are one consideration for PR visible in the service today. It is important to remember that Google+ is in beta testing. Google will add to and

refine features, so Google+ a year from today might look somewhat different than it does now.

What Google+ has

The most notable feature of Google+ is its ability to segment communications to people. Google+ provides separate channels, called Circles, for friends, family, acquaintances, people following you and any other Circle you might wish to create, such as fellow hobbyists or co-workers or members of an association to which you belong. Facebook lacks this feature. Google+ allows you to post to each of these segments without spilling over to the other, which greatly increases privacy, a knock against Facebook that offers one channel per user. In fact, common sense use of Google+ will allow one to post embarrassing photos for friends to chuckle over without having to explain to a prospective employer why you were pictured wearing a lampshade one boozy night.

From a PR perspective, this has an advantage because one can target messages. It is not difficult to envision a Google+ site in which a corporation posts news for employees in an employee circle, news for customers in a customer circle and news for investors in a Wall Street circle. The down side of such segmentation is increased time and cost. One has to set up each circle, populate it, then update content in each as well. While Facebook has little privacy, it is easier to make a single posting and be done with it. On the other hand, Google+ can serve as a single-source complement to other social media, which could be easier to maintain in the long run.

At first blush, the Ford Motor Google+ page appears to be a clone of its Facebook site. There doesn't appear to be any effort at segmentation yet. Ford could easily create Circles by product category – Mustangs, F 150 trucks, Focus, etc. I wouldn't be surprised as it gains experience with Google+ if it chooses to do that. Ford has been soliciting comments from followers as to what direction it should take.

Other than Circles, features are similar between Google+ and Facebook: The posting page is called “Stream” and is exactly like Facebook. It allows for placement of text, photos, videos, links and your location. The Google “chat” button allows one to text anyone else in Google+. There is a provision for registering one’s opinion about postings called +1 that is a knock-off of Facebook’s “Like” function. There are also separate pages for storing photos and videos with provisions for adding comments. Google+ arranges user observations to the side of a photo while Facebook puts them at the bottom. Finally, a link on the home page allows one to download Google+ to a mobile phone.

The Google+ profile page provides for detailed information about oneself – a personal photo, introduction, “bragging rights”, occupation, place of employment, education, links to personal and other web sites, places lived, contact numbers for work and home, relationship status, type of person you are looking for, gender, other names (nicknames) and a search visibility option that allows your information to be indexed or not. One may fill or not any of these categories and segment it to groups, so, for example, for employers, one might wish to show education and for the boys at the pub not. This greatly enhances privacy. In other respects, however, profile information is not that different from Facebook.

One nice feature in Google+ is that it provides tab access to most of Google’s other services – mail, calendar, documents, photo storage (Picasa), its news reader and aggregator service, direct access to Google search, You Tube, shopping, etc. In this, Google+ is better integrated than Facebook, and for those who are Google users – especially of G mail and search – Google+ is more convenient. This is highlighted by the Google “Hangout” page that allows one to download Google video and voice so one can videoconference with friends and a link called “Sparks” that allows one to search for information of interest and have recent stories gathered on one page – a distinctive Google benefit. At the time of

writing, “Sparks” was under further development, but it already can serve as a monitoring function for PR practitioners. While much of Google+ is like Facebook, Google appears to be integrating its services in such a way to make it easier for one to manage relationships online.

What does this mean for PR?

Google can become a social media home page for practitioners through which one can manage relationships across segments. It offers no advantages over Facebook for practitioners and marketers who want to reach the largest possible audiences. The success of Google+ is directly dependent on its growth rate. If it can add or take 100 million users from Facebook, there is a good chance it will become an important medium for PR. But, that is a big if. In any event, it is not too early for PR practitioners to begin experimentation with Google+ as a tool to develop individual and group relationships. Historically, PR practitioners have been laggards when it comes to new technology and media. There is some merit to that. One can avoid the fad of gadgetry and wasted time in developing a medium that has no impact in the end. On the other hand, delaying yields the field to others who are willing to experiment and see for themselves how to apply technology and media. If PR practitioners do not want to see themselves pushed aside, they would be well advised to look into Google+ now.

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