

The Social Web: Small Businesses / Big Solutions

An SMB's view of the current state of affairs in the wild world of social networks.

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It could be argued that social networks are following a second transition in their relatively short life-cycle. If first one brought us from a market where platforms try to compete to be *the* social network to a more diverse crowd where operators thrive to be the preferred destination of a certain niche, it is our opinion that the second one will bring us to a true ecosystem where social network services no longer simply co-exist but instead truly rely on each other. This second transition accompanies a larger shift on the Web: what started out as network of documents (the hyperlink model) is now turning into both a network of documents *and* a network of users; it is posited that a lot of the usefulness in the Web will be derived from the interactions between those two networks.

This confusing, transitional state of affairs is a growing problem for social platforms creators and operators and especially for small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) such as af83. In order to analyze and better address the situation, we have identified several specific roadblocks deriving from these shifts and the domain's relative lack of maturity. For each, we propose several possible solutions; they follow the lines of our current internal R&D efforts as well as our involvement and leadership in national and European research projects.

1. Making the Case that Users and Services are Worth Sharing

What on the surface looks self-evident, is not necessarily so for platform operators who have so far derived most of their income directly from the size and depth of their user base. The same goes for services offered by such or such platform, in our opinion mostly because of the lack of decentralized, micro-payment, per-act solutions to efficiently monetize them.

2. Show Sociologists Some Love

Most of the tangible efforts pertaining to social networks seem to be located on the technological front, when social networks are, by essence, also the crystallization of social issues. Sociologists have long studied the problems we face, albeit not necessarily in their current form. But it is undeniable that they have a wealth of experience, experiments and results that could be at their most useful if applied to our problems.

A few of the issues we could use their work or will need their help on are:

- What is 'acceptable' to users in terms of uses of their social graph, geo-localization?
- How can we define and better assist portability of contacts and media?
- What are our user's identities on the web? Can we merge them? How do they form and propagate?
- What is the impact of anonymity on participation, engagement and creativity on the social web?
- What are the old and new Privacy and Ethical concerns we face and how can we address them?

3. Brokering for Peace in the Mid-Web

Recent years have seen an explosion in the number of open protocols designed for or usable by social networking platforms. We now arrive to a state where a well-intended social services provider would theoretically have to use or compose with the following, non-exhaustive and still growing list of protocols and providers.

- Authentication: OpenID, CardSpace, i-card, Liberty Alliance, Facebook Connect.
- Authorization (OAuth, CardSpace, i-card, OpenSocial).
- Security and Privacy (X.509, SPKI, PGP, Compact Privacy Profile).
- Semantic Markup and Description (RDF, MicroFormats).
- Network Description (FOAF, XFN, OpenSocial, DiSo).
- Network Traversal (DiSo).
- Network Visualization (TouchGraph, WPS).
- Remote Manipulation of Data and their Relations (REST, SOAP, XML-RPC, DiSo).
- Service Description (XRDS, UDDP).
- Service Execution (OpenSocial, Facebook Applications).
- Message Transport (REST, SOAP, XMPP, SMTP).
- Application Hosting (OpenSocial).
- Indexation and Search (Google Social Graph).
- Payment, Micro-payments (MPTP, CPay, Paypal).

We surmise that the integration of such technologies is a mounting charge that can be greatly alleviated by developing and using brokering technologies such as Yahoo Pipes or TarPipe. They are the first step in ensuring that we can artfully coordinate the protocol dance that more and more platforms will have to participate in to ensure the blossoming of a global social ecosystem.

This, of course, is not entirely a new problem; middleware set out to address it back when it was just seen as a mean of decentralizing large applications and there is much that we can apply from that phase of computer science's history.

4. Finding our Way Back "Home"

Most of the protocols we now have to compose with rely on the existence of a user "home", most notably OAuth and OpenID.

But what is that home really? Where is it now? (Facebook or another social network service? Our web page, our blog?) Where can we put it in the Future? (Our mobile phone? Centralized servers? Specialized brokers?)

5. Plugging the Holes

Despite the impressive number of protocols and service solutions, there are still voids in the landscape. For example, a trustable micro-payment protocol would allow the exchange of goods and services across platforms and open the door to decentralized reselling and brokering. The lack of such a technology currently hinders the sheer development of a real 'social economy'.

6. Realizing that Social User Interfaces are not a Fast-Food Menu

Users have so far been presented with only a limited choice of interfaces, often emulated across service providers. Outside of the obvious accessibility and usability concerns this poses, is it our position that if we want to drive user engagement and adoption, we need to offer a better choice.

We need portable interfaces that can be used across platforms (browser, mobile); we need interfaces that adapt to our cultural identity, our context and our changing needs.

7. Welcoming Mobile Terminals and Services as True Members of the Family

Let's stop relying on mobile browsers who have been slow to catch up with their desktop counterparts and hinder interaction with their current limitations. Many mobile platforms offer the possibility to easily write dedicated applications that are easier to integrate with the rise in the use of APIs.

Let us also try not to emulate our desktop our web products on mobiles; let us recognize that mobile platforms are different and thus have distinct advantages (GPS, microphone, etc.) to create better social services.

8. Showing the Money

Simply put: we need business models for the social web. This concern is obviously not only one for big social networks like Facebook and MySpace but also for small creators and operators who dwell in this realm.

A few of the opportunities we have identified so far are below.

- Social Advertising: the road most travelled in the current state of affairs. Variations on this theme, through the identifications and reliance on micro-stars within a network could probably yield more result than the current schema.
- Micro-payment for the exchange of goods and services on the platform. This could also apply to connected issues such as the payment of developers who provide software applications for the platform or the repayment of personal debts between friends.
- Platforms for micro-niches, who could charge a subscription or access fee (ex.: INmobile.org).
- Reselling of information collected on the network. This avenue imposes strict ethical oversight.
- Selling direct access to a specialized network to outsiders (ex.: Sermo.com is openly accessible to doctors but charges a hefty fee for the drug companies and hedge funds who want to get anonymized access to it).
- Buying club: offering coupons and driving demand for clusters of people interested in the same type of products.
- Interacting with local, brick-and-mortar stores by allowing them to connect to a global market, follow their regulars and better serve their needs. Social Networks currently lead to only a very small amount of commerce in the 'real world' (estimates hover around 10%). By connecting social platforms with established boutiques, coffee shops, restaurants and bars, there could be much to gain from both parties, as recent efforts in that direction have shown.
- Finally, it would be of a utmost interest to find business solutions that rely on a common interest for users and funders. The current underlying disconnection hinges on the fact that most users come to the platform for a certain set of reasons (find friends, etc.), while funders bring cash to the operator of the platform for different reasons (study the habits of the user, present targeted ads, etc.). Finding common interests could be a great way to lead engagement and soften the ethical and privacy issues that currently hover around social networks.