

Section III: Social Networking

13 Google Plus

Google+, pronounced and sometimes written as Google Plus or abbreviated as G+, is the social networking service launched by Google in Jun 2011. Google Plus is actually the latest in the series of Social Networking services launched by Google. Before this there was Orkut, Buzz, Wave and Lively. However, none of the services had a global impact. Google Plus as a networking service is probably the best, which has come out of the Google stable so far. Such was the interest and expectations from the service that it attracted 20 million users within the first three weeks of its launch, the fastest by any social network till date.

Social Networking websites like Facebook, MySpace and Friendster have existed for many years and have a tremendous following. Facebook is the current leader with about 750 Million users. Almost all of us have used one of these services at some time or the other to preclude a discussion on what Social Networking Sites are. So we can straightaway jump to what Google + brings to the table.

13.1 What is Different

Two concepts make Google+ different from other Social Networking sites. The first is that Google+ insists on a real name and identity of a user unlike other sites, which allow pseudonyms, and fake identities. The underlying philosophy is that people behave better online when their true identities are known. We will not get into the pros and cons of this but this may mean a world of respite for users who have been harassed, blackmailed or generally drowned out in spam. It also makes it possible for users to know exactly whom they are adding to their network.

The second conceptual difference is that Google+ recognizes that a person is not the same to every one else and does behave differently with different people and in different circumstances. Therefore, a system has been introduced which allows the users to decide what level of social interaction they want with different people. This gets the online interaction closer to the real-life interaction we have with others, by allowing us to selectively share things with different groups of people.

13.2 The Basic Structure

- **Circles**

At the heart of Google+ are Circles, which are a way of organizing your contacts into groups for sharing purposes. Circles are a subset of your online contacts, which contain only those people you add to the particular circle. So you can create circles for family, friends, business associates, colleagues etc. You can share stuff with all your circles or select any one or more of them, making sure you are sharing relevant content with the right people.

When you share something with specific circles, contacts in your other circles do not get to see it. So if you share your child's school performance with family, your friends, colleagues etc will not get to see it, thus lending more privacy and flexibility to your online presence.

You can also customize your personal profile for circles, making only selective information visible to contacts in different circles. So your contact details can be visible to your close friends and family but not to your other circles.

- **Stream**

The Stream is where you see all the updates from the various contacts in your various circles. This is where the users also enter their own status updates or share photos, videos, etc. Users can filter the stream by Circles, which will then show them only updates from contacts in that circle.

- **Sparks**

Sparks allow the user to specify his interests and then helps the user to find and share articles, videos, images etc on the subjects. This is something like a Reader we discussed earlier in the book, and you will always have something new to read about things you are interested in.

- **Hangouts**

This is the online version of unplanned meets in the real life. Hangouts are virtual video chat rooms, which can be accessed anytime. So when you are free you can let your friends know that you are hanging out and they can join you for a face-to-face video chat. This is a much less intrusive way of letting people know that you are interested in spending some time chatting, than starting an unsolicited chat with a person at a time when he might be staring into a Eureka moment. With Hangouts you are inviting people and not forcing them into a conversation.

- **Huddles**

Huddles is a mobile application offering group chat feature. With Huddles, when you are coordinating with a group of people, you don't need to send repeat messages to multiple people to get everyone on the same page. Huddles turns the conversation into a single group chat and is a great feature for discussions. It saves you a bunch of time and effort having to contact people individually.

- **Instant Upload**

Photos happen to be the most shared stuff on the social networking websites. With Google+ instant upload feature, the photos you take with your mobile phone automatically get uploaded online. Please note that you can also upload and share photos from your computer or your stream in the conventional manner.

13.3 Why Use Google+

Google has created an ecosystem of sorts and has multiple applications and services vying for your attention. Most of these services are integrated with each other and you do not have to successively login and logout to access your data. When you are signed into Google for one of the many things you might be using, the Google bar on top automatically keeps updating you about the activity in your Google+ account. This saves you a lot of time and keeps you updated in real-time.

Google is one of the most trusted brands in the online space, has a strong privacy policy and assures a high degree of data security. Google's endeavours towards insisting on real identities and the ease of removal of personal information reiterate its commitment towards transparency.

Google+ has better apps for mobile than any other social networking website. As things stand, more and more people are using mobiles for online activities.

Finding contacts and managing the conversation with them is far more easy and efficient with Google+.

You are not forced to follow people on Google+. If someone wants to follow you, he/she can do so without your approval. This is hardly a privacy concern since they will not be able to see your posts unless you have made it public or shared it with the 'following' circle. In any case, you can see the list of people following you and can block any person from seeing your posts.

Google has taken the transparency and free will to a new level by letting the users have full control over their personal data. An interface under the heading *Data Liberation* provides the users the ability to download all their data, *anytime* they want and even *hide* or *delete* this data permanently. This is totally unlike other services, which are reluctant to allow users to delete their accounts permanently.

In conclusion, we can say that Google+ is a powerful and efficient tool, which takes online networking closer to real life social networking. Google has a large bouquet of services and a huge user base, which makes the prospect of Google+ becoming a necessity in the coming days. Leave it out at your own risk.

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Sources: Keuzegids Master ranking 2013; Elsevier 'Beste Studies' ranking 2012; Financial Times Global Masters in Management ranking 2012

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