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Changing Faces of Social Media

Fastest-growing groups on social
networking sites are over 50.

: : by Jimmy Magahern

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The Changing Face of Social Media

Better Communications 2011

The fastest-growing group in social networking is older, more savvy and determined to put the "graces" back into social.

By Jimmy Magahern

Janet Bruning laughs when asked if she's a newbie to online social networks.

"Oh, I've been into computers since there were personal computers," says Bruning, 69, a retired accountant. "I had a Commodore 64, and I learned to program on that. As soon as there was email, I had email. I was using Multiplan and WordStar, back in the DOS days."

Call her an O.G. — Original Geek. Bruning finds it funny that

seniors are almost always portrayed in the media as technologically inept Luddites, unable to find Facebook on the Internet because they don't know whether to type one word or two. Given that many of Bruning's generation were actually the first adopters of the PC and the Internet — not to mention color TV and cordless phones — it shouldn't be surprising that at least some of them have maintained their passion for techy innovations.

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"People my age are always saying, 'My grandkids got me into computers.' But with me, I'm the one that got my kids on the computers!"

Bruning's latest passion? Just like her children's and her grandchildren's, it's social networks. And she's not alone in her age group. According to comScore, a global Internet marketing research company, those over 55 now represent the fastest-growing segment of visitors to popular social networking sites like

Facebook and Twitter. A 2010 report by the Pew Research Center found the use of social media among people over 50 nearly doubled from that of the previous year.

Nevertheless, as comfortably as some of these old-school computer users have moved into social media, navigating what is still a predominantly youth-dominated scene can at times feel like riding a crowded bus in a rowdy college town. Profanities abound in YouTube comments and Twitter feeds, and scam artists targeting neophyte users have made some social networks genuinely unwelcoming places for seniors.

Bruning says she feels those unfriendly vibes even in some of the games hosted on social network sites, which have become her favorite online activity.

"Mafia Wars can get really nasty, I hear," she says, admitting that so far she's avoided playing

the popular multiplayer game, which is hosted on Facebook, Yahoo and MySpace. Even Farmville, Facebook's most popular Zynga game, gets a little too competitive for her taste. "I just don't want to play some games because of the atmosphere," she says.

As it happens, Internet companies have been listening to "silver surfers" like Bruning, and a few social networking sites targeted especially to those over 50 have emerged to capture the growing demographic, by offering chat and gaming features similar to Facebook's and Pogo's but without all the aggressive and impolite language.

One such place is Winster, a 5-year-old social networking site founded by husband and wife team Jerry and Michelle Kaplan that's been averaging about 2 million unique visitors a month, drawing primarily older women.

"I had just had a baby, and I was up playing double solitaire on this social networking site, where you have two decks of cards and you play against others," says Michelle Kaplan, who, in a bright red hat, also doubles as helpful navigator "Winnie Winster" on the site. "And I was remarking to my husband

that people were so mean on this site. They were always swearing at you, and they would stop playing with you if you didn't play the right card. It was a very hostile environment. And my husband said, 'That's because you're playing on a gaming site designed for men.' So we designed something more for women that was more cooperative and collaborative."

The format, which combines non-competitive puzzle games with a chat screen, encourages visitors to join groups and help each other by trading pieces and points, which can be redeemed for prizes. Its kinder, gentler environment has become a hit with players like Bruning, who, in turn, has recommended it to others, including her 50-year-old daughter, Debi Watts.

"My mother told me about it," says Watts, who now lives in Tucson. "I used to play games on Facebook, but it kind of got overwhelming, and I'm not into the drama situation with the younger kids." On Winster, Watts says, she's made friends with people her own age who are delighted to find a site that's the equivalent of the grown-up's table in the world of social media.



Wearing a bright red hat, Michelle Kaplan doubles as the helpful navigator Winnie Winster on the 5-year-old social networking site www.winster.com.



On the 5-year-old Winster site non-competitive puzzle games are combined with a chat screen, encouraging visitors to join in groups. The site is a hit with the over-50 crowd.

"It's not geared toward kids," Watts says. "In fact, the games that you play there would probably be boring for the younger crowd.

"But that's just how we like it," she adds with a laugh.

Where Everybody Knows Your Name

In some ways, everything new that social media has brought to the Internet is actually old.

In a recent op-ed piece for the social media news blog Mashable.com, blogger Josh Rose pointed out three ways social media seems to be bringing back the values of the older generation.

By sharing photos on sites like Flickr, Instagram and Facebook, Rose observes, we're bringing back the family slide show, replacing the slide carousel with our Facebook wall photos. And indeed, one of Facebook's main draws for older users is, as some put it, "That's where the pictures of the grandkids are."

Secondly, by using our cell phones to "check in" at restaurants and shops utilizing location apps like Foursquare or Facebook's Places feature, which allow merchants to offer preferential deals to frequent customers, we're bringing back rewarding "the regular." "I had one older relative who went to the same restaurant so much they named a sandwich after him," Rose recalls. "Yesteryear's sandwich naming is today's Mayor's Badge."

Most importantly, Rose says, social media has brought back the practice of family and friends checking in with each other on a daily basis. We may not be gathering around the dinner table anymore to share the highlights of our days, but every family member

is posting and checking one another's status updates, sometimes hourly. And, by way of texting, teens are finally letting parents know their comings and goings — and disproving them the day after with their Facebook party photos.

Ideally, it should be an online environment where seniors feel more at home than ever. And yet, while their numbers may be growing the fastest on social media sites, AARP says only a quarter of its members are yet on Facebook, and some older adults are still infrequent Internet users.

Obsolete technology, and an unwillingness among the age group to upgrade, is responsible for some of this. The Pew research study found that people over 65 remain among those least likely to have high-speed Internet access at home — and as anyone who's tried it knows, playing Farmville on dial-up can be an exercise in futility.

But much of the non-participation is by choice. Jo Ann LaRussa of Casa Grande says she posts occasional status updates on Facebook and has registered on Twitter, but feels social media can be too time consuming.

"You can sit on Facebook forever, if you go to everybody's wall and just read and read," says the 74-year-old, who still works as a real estate agent. "And some of the stuff people post is very personal — too personal, I think."

Older adults are generally more concerned about privacy than their grandchildren's generation, and that can limit participation in social networks as well.

"I don't announce that I'm going on vacation or things like that," LaRussa says. "And I don't sit there and type, 'I'm going to lunch with such-and-such today.'"

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Mostly, it seems older adults are the one generation that can remember life before computers and often feel the Internet's version of "the social" pales when compared to actual face-to-face communication.

"I'm one of those old folks who still reads my newspaper with a paper in hand," admits LaRussa with a laugh. "There are still things that I prefer to do offline. And talking with friends and family is one of those things."

The Digital Divide

Like many new social media recruits, LaRussa says she got into Facebook because her children and many of her younger friends were on it.

"Everybody's doing it!" she says. "And even the things that were new a few years ago, like email and instant messaging, have been replaced by Facebook. If you're not on it, you're simply dead in the water."

Indeed, older adults who resist social media may even find themselves ostracized by members of their own peer groups.

"A lot of people in my age group just

aren't interested," says Janet Bruning. "Either they're already computer illiterate, or they're just not interested in learning something new. It seems to be the big dividing line once you get up in my age group."

For some, the memory of challenges with earlier designed computers, much slower and generally more limited, can keep them away from sampling the richer online experience available today.

"I had some friends who had an email machine at one time," Bruning says. "When it broke, they said, 'The heck with it!' And that was it!"

Those who do venture into the new world of social media, however, with all its genuflections to an almost old-fashioned sense of community, seniors may actually find themselves in surprisingly comfortable territory.

"For me, my online life is my life," says Debi Watts, whose disability keeps her mostly homebound. "And I've made some good friends online that I keep in touch with. Honestly, I don't know what I'd do without my social networks!" ■



new facebook for seniors
www.seniorcitizenhumor.blogspot.com

Seniors like Janet Bruning and Jo Ann LaRussa are proving that jokes like the image above, found on a website devoted to senior citizen humor, are quickly becoming a thing of the past.