



Post-Google Buzz: Has Google+ Gotten Privacy Right?

by Joseph J. Lewczak and Vejay G. Lalla
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In June, Google unveiled the test phase of its new social network, Google+. While Google+ is regarded as Google's "response" to Facebook, the service is Google's second attempt at social networking after privacy problems plagued Google Buzz, a Twitter-like service based around user updates.

Key questions that may impact the ultimate success of Google+ are whether Google+ has addressed those user privacy concerns and whether opening Google+ to third-party advertisers and brands will leave it vulnerable to the flaws that doomed Google Buzz.

Establishing Privacy At Outset

When a user signed up for the original Google Buzz, the service automatically "followed" everyone in the user's Gmail contact list and made information regarding those users frequently contacted publicly available in the user's profile.

This and other parts of the original Buzz service attracted so many complaints from consumers that Google was the target of an FTC action, which it settled in 2010. In comparison, Google+ privacy settings are simpler and more clearly displayed, and users are given a higher level of control over content and who they share it with.

The key aspect of Google+ that distinguishes it from Google Buzz is the concept of "Circles," which allow users to create smaller groups of contacts (e.g., family, colleagues, baseball team friends, etc.) with whom they can share content. If friends add you to their Circles, and allow you to see their shared content, you're not obligated to also add them to your Circles.

It looks like Google has taken consumer sentiment and the FTC's concerns to heart. One of the major tenets in the FTC's privacy framework is "privacy by design," whereby companies are urged to take privacy issues into consideration in the overall development of a product or service from the ground up, not just as an afterthought.

Advertising on Google+

Google has hinted that it will soon introduce Google+ profiles specifically designed for brands and businesses to promote their products. Advertisers are already "optimizing" their profiles to make the most of the platform. Google+'s +1 feature allows users to "+1" any post, page or link to publicly express their approval and affiliate their profile with it.

The feature may prove a valuable asset to brands as Google records this user activity for reporting to publishers, advertisers and connected sites.

Will Google+ Still Get it Wrong?

One potential red flag for Google+ is the ability to "re-share" posts that friends have made -- although, unlike Buzz, the options for disabling these settings are clearly displayed up front.

Users are currently responding to – and liking – the level of privacy they are afforded on Google+.

In fact, according to recent statistics, more than two-thirds of Google+ activity occurs within private Circles. And unlike Facebook and Twitter, Google+ does not currently license any content to third parties or allow participation from application developers or advertisers.

However, Google+ has suggested that it do so in the near future. If Google+ fails to clearly state its policies in this regard, it may – for all its initial efforts – find itself Buzzed.

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