Why did Harvard students accept Facebook as "cool"?

This question previously had details. They are now in a comment.

Jared Morgenstern, works at Facebook
Updated Aug 19, 2014 · Upvoted by Michael Kong, former engineer at Facebook (2010-2013) and Mark L. Levinson, studied at Harvard University

Originally Answered: Why did Harvard students accept Facebook as 'cool'?

I studied this, as if my livelihood depended on it, when I competed with Facebook in 2004, and have looked back on many times for the almost 7 years so I worked at Facebook, so I feel qualified to speak on it, although I was a recent Harvard alumni at the time of launch (Class of '03).

Still, as one of the earliest alumni, having authentic user id number 703, (now one of my lucky numbers :) I feel it comes down, as social services often do, to the ability of a service to drive and facilitate flirtation for a new generation, free from predators and distinct from the tools used by generations prior. Sex. Or, more precisely, the perceived usefulness of a tool for increasing your odds of dating successfully during the period of your lives when this is maximally explored. I say perceived, b/c fantasizing about that girl 3 rows ahead of you in CS51 by refreshing her profile picture was not always effective, but it sure was a lot more real than flipping through an outdated, if available, printed facebook (yes, this used to be a word that didn't need to be capitalized).

At the time of TheFacebook.com's launch, my cofounders Eddie Lim and Eoin Matthews and I were 3 weeks into the launch of social network, Metails.com. Our service enabled you to connect with strangers based on your fashion and product tastes. You could import your purchasing histories and decorate your profile with your purchases. We believed it was solving a unique need, connecting you with like minded folks who shared an interest in the things you cared about, with your purchases being a verified proxy for what you cared about. We also let you decorate your profile with brands, e.g. Converse and The Legend of Zelda, to use those as hubs for connection.

Our thesis was that Friendster and MySpace were interesting, but they were missing the boat by having you connect and form stronger connections with people you already knew. ==We were created a space for people to become friends, not a space for already friends.==

When TheFacebook.com came out, I got an adrenaline shot, the same I still get when competitors launch in the same space as something I'm working on, and I quickly signed up. I breathed a sigh of relief because they were mapping connections and friendships across a set of people you already knew or were likely to know. "What's the value of that [graph]?" I asked myself (note: graph language was not in vogue at that time).

And then, as I compared the slope of Facebook's usage and compared it to mine - both of our sites had the same set of non password protected statistics automatically displayed at "/stats" AND as I got email from friend after friend encouraging me to try to partner and learn from Mark, 2 years behind me at Harvard CS, I started to swallow my pride and study the service, eventually meeting Mark in Finagle Bagle and forming the foundation of our relationship - reversing my original opinion that I could get him to join MY company.

What I learned during those three weeks prior to meeting him was that, by mapping the relationships we already had in a period of dynamic new relationship creation and extending them to people you were actually likely to meet in person - on campus, literally locally relevant - you crushed our idea to have you meet a stranger living in Dallas who liked the same cut of Diesel jeans you did. You created a network reinforcing structure that rolled over everything in its path. My initial thesis, that it was redundant to do this, was entirely wrong. Redundancy only proved to strengthen engagement and growth, b/c the hyper local network ensured that at least one person at your dining table in Annenberg Hall or your graduate level organic chemistry class had heard about it and was willing to talk about something they had
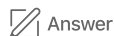
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If you look at the early homepage, you can see Mark succinctly stated the problems that his service was solving. He got most of them right, except for the fourth bullet point, which I'm sure glad he geeked out on, b/c otherwise we wouldn't have Newsfeed, platform, and a ton of other services that only get life breathed into them by an engineering founder.

Notice that dating, flirting, hooking up is not mentioned at all. It cannot be. That makes it predatory or loserish, that makes it OK Stupid.

A service cannot be cool unless it is simple enough for the coolest people in the group it targets, in this case college, and yes, I mean that in the most "Mean Girls" sense of the term, a social hierarchy driven by popularity, often heavily influenced by attractiveness, where the folks who have the least amount of need or time to devote to understanding such a service, also are on the service because of its simplicity, and in a manner that increases their social value at best and at worst poses no risk to it.

Facebook did that more simply than folks had ever seen before, and it put Harvard students in control of their projected appearance and identity, in an environment that was protected and safe with an audience that could be controlled.

Does that sound familiar? Instagram. Snapchat. Tinder.

Each generation latches on to their own methods for graduating through adolescence and taking ownership of the world and Facebook provided the first real digital bar of like minded folks, protected from parents and younger siblings , and sandboxed away from that creepy guy who never would be caught dead at a college like yours.

Facebook then went on to graduate from email authenticated networks (which afforded a level of perceived generational privacy akin to Snapchat's ephemerality for the current generation) to bring us photo tagging, increasing the likelihood that you'd see that cute girl or guy even if she or he wasn't exactly sure how to connect their canon digital elph, and Newsfeed, which turned the detective work into scrolling.

Never were any features built expressly for the use case of flirtation, fantasy, or meeting people - but sex, drugs, and rock and roll are powerful motivators.

My $0.02.

:)

Update: Someone asked me, if I knew the above in the early days of Facebook, why didn't I just launch a competitive service at other colleges.

The answer is twofold.

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Second, this was a case of if you can't beat 'em, join em, suck it up and go learn from people who are better than you. But, even then, I came pretty close to competing head to head. I remember negotiating a partnership agreement with a friend of a friend in college to join our nascent social networking efforts and battle Facebook from the middle of the country (it had already launched at Stanford). We had discussed it all verbally, and all that remained was the ink. I remember deciding that I didn't want to spend the next X years of my life being a copy-cat. I still remember feeling the anxiety while pacing in my girlfriend's apartment leading up to the phone call where I would be walking away from that deal. Had I decided to compete, Facebook most certainly would have won, even if you assume flawless execution. The network density I mentioned earlier swallowed up all competitive threats that organically developed from other colleges. Facebook's Dustin Moskovitz and other team members would reprioritize to the front of the list any colleges that had launched their own social network, and then launch at the surrounding schools. I also think having first launched at a well respected school - Harvard - aided this graph based drowning tactic, as all other things being equal, it lended credibility to a service where you were porting some of your identity. I remember my first impression of Google was that a) it worked and b) that my trusted computer science buddies respected their buddies who were making this out of Stanford. I think the larger factor was the combination of network density and tactical execution of the team extending that network, prioritizing expansion by the schools that had the most connectivity with people already on the network. At one point, Facebook almost merged with a German clone that had strong internal network effects, but the deal fell through, which, although it devastated the company at the time, had a surprisingly happy ending, with strong network effects of Facebook in the surrounding european nations eventually propelling Facebook to be the victor in Germany (note: today I believe mobile penetration, ease of application install and the ease of "finding friends" are strong enough to support category leaders that emerge in specific countries, propelled by customization that support local cultural idiosyncrasies).

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Jared Morgenstern
Original Author · Aug 26, 2014
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