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Pmarchive - Why Ning?

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Why Ning?

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This is the first in a series of occasional posts in which I will talk about Ning, the new Internet service that I have created with my co-founder and CEO Gina Bianchini and an outstanding team here in Palo Alto, California and around the world.

In this series of posts I'll discuss Ning both from the perspective of what we are doing it and how we are doing it -- an applied case study of building a new Internet company in the '00's, if you will.

In this first post, I set the context by providing a brief overview of Ning and why we created it.

Ning in a nutshell:

Ning gives you the ability to create **your own social network for anything** -- in about two minutes, for free.

When you create your own social network on Ning, you choose from a set of features -- including videos, photos, blogs, music, discussions, profiles, friends, messaging, and more. You can make your network public or private. You can also customize every aspect of your social network's appearance -- by choosing from a set of themes or adding your own HTML and CSS.

You can customize how your social network works to the nth degree -- by dragging and dropping; by dipping into HTML and CSS; and, if you're a programmer, by modifying the underlying source code and using our extensive suite of platform APIs to do anything you want.

The social network that you create on Ning is yours -- **it's what *you* want to create** for your friends, your family, your interests, your city, your class, your start-up, your political candidate, or your nonprofit activity. It's whatever you want it to be.

Network Creators on Ning have already created **71,531 social networks** on an incredibly broad range of topics -- and, in turn, those networks are being visited today by millions of people.

Ning continually adds new features and APIs, and makes sure your network -- and every other network on Ning -- runs fast, reliably, and at high scale.

By default, the service is **free** and we run targeted ads on your network. We also let you **buy the right to run your own ads or not have ads run at all**, plus a range of additional premium services that give you additional capabilities like more storage and bandwidth.

From a handful of huge social networks, to millions of social networks of all sizes:

I'm an enormous fan of the first generation of social networks -- services like MySpace, Facebook, and Youtube. I think they are incredibly useful and compelling services that are bringing tens of millions of people into the world of social networking -- and that's a really big deal.

I also think that in time, **many people will decide they want to create their own social networks** -- echoing the 1990's, when tens of millions of people who were introduced to the online world by proprietary online services like AOL, Compuserve, and Prodigy ultimately decided they wanted to create and live in a world of millions of web sites, not just a world of a few large walled gardens.

I think both approaches -- large proprietary walled gardens, and millions of specialized social networks created by regular people -- will coexist just fine, but **the more people learn what social networking makes possible, the more interested they will be in creating their own worlds**, their own social

networks, around every conceivable need and niche: their families, friends, cities, companies, start-ups, classes, hobbies, interests, political candidates, nonprofit activities, and so on.

That's why my co-founder Gina and I started Ning -- to see what we could do to make it as easy as possible for regular people, potentially in the millions, to build their own social networks for anything. We wanted to enable people to create their own worlds, not just join someone else's.

What kinds of social networks are people building on Ning?

The range and variation among the 71,531 social networks than have already been created on Ning astonishes me daily.

Networks for music video directors to handbell musicians to PHP coders to lovers of all things cute to penguin aficionados. Activites ranging from wakeboarding to cycling to baby naming to bedroom music studios to crime fiction. Networks for TV shows, movies, and bands ranging from the Smashing Pumpkins to We Live Here to We're An American Band to The Class to CSI to the Sick Puppies. And networks in languages from Chinese to Spanish to Argentinian Spanish to German and beyond.

And those examples don't even take into account all the private networks that are by invitation only.

It's *all* over the map -- more proof, if anyone needed it, that human creativity is boundless.

Fun fact:

There are already more social networks on Ning than on the entire rest of the Internet.

Of course, collectively the networks on Ning are not yet as large as the big walled gardens -- MySpace, Facebook, Youtube -- but both the number of networks on Ning and the number of active members, including the average number of active members per network, are growing very fast.

What's a social network, really?

I think that sometimes people have too narrow a view of what "social network" means -- or can mean.

Of course the standard definition -- today -- is an **online environment where people have profiles and interact via one another via friend links, messages, invitations, discussions, and sharing videos, photos, and music**.

And those networks are certainly easy to create on Ning.

But even today, we see a lot of social networks that are **customized and focused** -- perhaps focused mostly on videos, or mostly on a certain kind of music, or mostly on photos of art or nature -- or focused in other, even more creative ways.

I think the definition of what it means to be a social network is going to expand rapidly from here -- to incorporate many kinds of behavior and many features that people would be surprised by today, ranging from real-time communication to ecommerce to mobile uploading and downloading to games and beyond.

I believe that in the long run, "social network" will imply people interacting online, in a dizzying array of modes, methods, and styles -- in software environments that let people express themselves and connect in any way they can possibly envision.

You can already see that happening on Facebook since the introduction of the Facebook platform five weeks ago, and you can certainly see it happening on Ning -- and **we are going to push new features as hard and as fast as we possibly can**, and open up as many new capabilities and ways to interact as we and Network Creators can imagine.

You can expect a *lot* of creativity in this whole field over the next five years.

Our plan with Ning:

Our plan is to build a very large and very vibrant platform in which millions of people can create their own highly tailored and customized social networks for anything and invite in tens or even hundreds of millions of people to join and participate.

To get here, our first step was to **build the service itself** -- the underlying platform (which I will discuss in detail in the next post in this series) and the "your own social network for anything" application you

see today. We did this over the last two and a half years.

With the release of "your own social network for anything" at the end of February, we clearly achieved product/market fit. As a result, we're now in **scaling** mode -- running the service itself at a steadily increasing level of performance, reliability, and scale, and continually adding new features and new APIs that let people do more and more, both with the features we provide and by building their own features on our platform.

From here, as we continue to scale, we plan to **support the service** by generating revenue from two primary sources: targeted ads, which we run by default on pages throughout the service; and premium services, which let a Network Creator go beyond the boundaries of the free service -- including buying the right to run your own ads, or not have ads run at all.

That's it -- pretty simple!

Why I love working on Ning and at Ning:

As I've previously discussed on this blog, I think **the Internet is coming into its own as a medium**, right now.

After **12 years of experimentation**, when I and a lot of other people tried a lot of experiments to try to figure out how people everywhere were really going to use this marvelous collective invention, I think it's becoming crystal clear what some of the defining characteristics of the Internet really are.

Giving people the ability to communicate in many new ways -- making geography finally irrelevant.

Giving people the ability to express themselves in many new ways -- the impact of the printing press, magnified a millionfold.

Giving people the ability to create their own worlds for everything they care about -- and connecting with everyone else who shares the same interests, goals, and dreams.

These are things that previous technology and media -- telephone, telegraph, paper mail, fax, television, radio, newspapers, magazine -- occasionally approached in sharply limited and fragmented ways... but now **with the Internet are available to over a billion people worldwide already** and a **lot more every day**.

And I think that over the next several years we are going to see an unleashing of creativity and innovation in this realm that will make the 1990's look like a sideshow act.

It's a magical time, and I couldn't be more fired up to be a part of it.

Ning is one approach -- of many, to be sure -- to putting these new capabilities into the hands of a huge number of people, and one that I am very excited about and one that we plan to pour a huge amount of effort into -- tuning, tweaking, adding features, scaling, expanding, and improving, hopefully for years to come.

Coming next:

In the next post in this series I will describe the Ning platform in depth, and how you can use it to build practically any social experience you can think of with surprisingly little effort.