

The Buzz on Google: A Technological Beehive

By Jack Chen '13

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Just a couple of weeks ago, Google released Buzz, a social networking tool integrated into its e-mail service, Gmail. Google Buzz, designed to complement existing web services, merges features from both Twitter and Facebook, allowing users to communicate with each other not only through text but also images and video. Like subscribing to Twitter feeds, Buzz users can choose contacts to “follow”. Buzz also offers a commenting and “like” system similar to Facebook’s. Google Account holders can access Buzz through their Gmail inboxes; at the moment, the iPhone, Symbian, Windows Mobile, the BlackBerry OS and phones running Android partially support Buzz as well.

Instead of competing against popular sites that already have tens and hundreds of millions of users, Google Buzz aims to integrate them all into a seamless experience. Buzz is already fully compatible with Twitter, Flickr, Picasa, YouTube, Google Chat and Google Reader, in addition to Gmail, of course. For example, one could set Google to import tweets and automatically send them out to Buzz followers. Although Buzz currently isn’t compatible with Facebook, Google has ambitions to expand on that direction.

“We want to make sure that we do have the most open, well integrated, well behaving social network in the industry,” Mr. Bradley Horowitz, Google’s vice president of product management told eWeek. Other Buzz features that appeal to users include the generous unlimited-character and multiple full-size image attachments allowed, a non-existent setup process (all details are directly imported from Gmail), and the automatic process whereby Buzz pre-selects one’s followers and followed based on regularity of emails/chats.

Buzz joins Google Wave and Orkut in Google’s attempt to diversify from advertising, which makes up for over ninety five percent of Google’s revenue. Orkut is relatively unknown in the United States but has proved surprisingly popular in India and Brazil, while Wave is slowly being rolled out on an invite-only basis, similar to how Gmail was released in 2004. “Wave is on the Gmail path, and it’s probably going to grow as Gmail did,” said Joe Entenman ’11. “With Buzz, I think it’s a little harder to say. It’ll either be an instant success or a complete flop.”

Within hours of Buzz’s release, however, the entire web was flooded with complaints about privacy issues. Google engineers swiftly set out to solve the problems, staying overnight at Google headquarters in Mountain View, California. “I’ve been impressed with how quickly Google has responded to complaints,” said Entenman. “It’s good that they’re listening to what users are saying and making changes in response.”

Nonetheless, some of the original problems still persist. The main concern users had was with the default setting, in which a list of the full names of a user’s most-contacted Gmail Contacts is publicly displayed on that user’s Google profile. Another problem is specific to the mobile

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version of Google Buzz. When users post from their cell phones, their precise location – street number, street name, city, and state – is revealed online.

While these privacy issues are likely to be fixed in the coming weeks, Google Buzz is facing a backlash of bad publicity and legal violations. A Harvard Law School student has filed a class-action lawsuit and the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC) has registered a formal complaint with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), both about Google's privacy management.

Luckily for Google, all of the publicity--regardless of whether it's positive or negative--about Buzz has prompted many to try the service out for themselves. Just two days after its release, nearly ten million posts and comments had been logged, with over two hundred posts per minute from cell phones. When the various concerns are finally resolved, Buzz has potential to become the new social-networking hub. "A lot of people already use Buzz because of Gmail," said Panat Taranat '13, who finds Buzz useful for communicating with friends and family. "The interface is great; it brings the simplicity of Twitter together with the [many] things you can do [on] Facebook."