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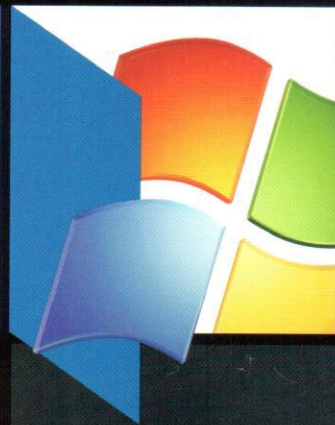
# MAXIMUM PC

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# THE NEWS



## Social Network Shakeup

One week, three announcements, four major companies: The numbers add up to a full-blown social networking war

**THE FIRST HALF OF 2011** was fairly uneventful for social networking—until a fateful week toward the end of June shook up the status quo. In the span of eight days, several major announcements (and a major new contender) rocked the scene, each adding fuel to the blazing social network war.

### Google+

Google fired the first volley when it unveiled Google+, a new invite-only social network, on June 28. Google+'s Circles-based approach to contact groups and its RSS-like Sparks feature gained some deserved attention, but the *pièce de résistance* is Hangouts, a group video chat for your Circles of contacts. No other social network offers a similar service.

The war got serious quickly. Just days after Google+ launched, Google stopped displaying real-time Tweets in its search results due to a lapsed contract. Google plans to reintroduce real-time results soon—starting with info from Google+ results.

### MySpace

MySpace's sale on June 30 serves as a warning to companies riding high on the "social media bubble." Specific Media bought MySpace for a comparatively paltry \$35 million. Reportedly, the group wants to re-establish the network as a music-centric hangout under the creative direction of Justin Timberlake, who is one of the investors. One analyst is skeptical: "It would take a miracle to restore it

to what it once was," says Jim Tobin, president of Ignite Social Media. "They'll have to do something significant, and fairly soon."

### Facebook

Facebook's "awesome" announcement on July 6 turned out to be just OK: integrated Skype video chat. Facebook's version of Skype only supports one-on-one conversations, so it isn't quite as awesome as the Hangouts feature in Google+, but it's easy to use and served to steal some of Google+'s immense thunder. A text-based group chat was also unveiled.

Tobin expects Facebook to stay strong in the face of Google+. "Google+ Circles may just be the kick they need. Just don't underestimate them. They've gotten to where they are by being faster and smarter than both Twitter and MySpace." *Ad Age* contributor Judy Shapiro thinks Facebook will survive the war for another reason entirely—money. "Facebook is horrible, but a lot of people need it to be successful," she says.

### Microsoft?

The dark horse in the race is Microsoft. The company already claimed a 1.6 percent stake in Facebook; the "awesome" announcement gives

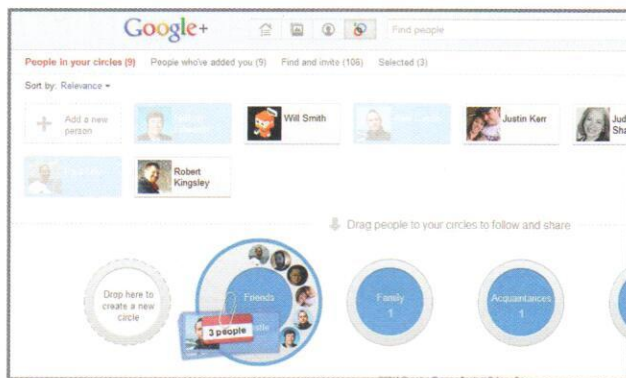
it yet another toe-hold. Could Redmond be planning a social network of its own? Most analysts don't think so, but on July 15, a "social search" teaser page appeared on Microsoft-owned Socl.com before quickly being yanked.

### The Future

With so many networks vying for your time, social media users may have some hard decisions to make. "The entry of Google+ and continued changes in Facebook will make most consumers realize that social media can only take up so much shelf life in their digital lives," says Jake Wengroff, the global director of Social Media Strategy at Frost & Sullivan. He expects the venture capital money train to keep rolling, however.

*Ad Age*'s Shapiro expects social networks in general to thrive going forward. "I believe the Internet is evolving into a bunch of mini-webs—you have your web, and I have mine," she says.

Only time will tell how the social network war will pan out, especially with the allure of skyrocketing cash valuations stoking the fire. One thing's for certain: When companies engage in full-scale feature wars, users emerge as winners. —BRAD CHACOS



Adding friends is simple in Google+: just drag-and-drop their pictures into the desired circles.