

## A Conversation With Mark Zuckerberg

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*Current* recently had the privilege to talk with thefacebook.com creator Mark Zuckerberg. When we spoke, Mark was enjoying a leave of absence from his studies at Harvard University; he has rented out a house with some friends in Palo Alto, California, and spends his days working with collaborators on his next project – a peer-based file-sharing program named Wirehog (wirehog.com) that will allow for the seamless sharing of files among friends.

*Could you briefly discuss thefacebook's inception?*

The idea for the website was motivated by a social need at Harvard to be able to identify people in other residential houses – Harvard is a fairly unfriendly place. While each residential house listed directories of their residents, I wanted one online directory where all students could be listed - someplace where I would be able to find all of the people who are the most relevant to my life. The result was thefacebook.

*And from there you spread the website to other top schools... MIT, Yale, Stanford.*

Yeah, but the goal was never to be elitist... we had a launch plan to enter into other colleges based on where friends would be most likely to overlap, and so the site spread organically based upon that model, and now we operate at a broad spectrum of campuses. It doesn't make sense to exclude anybody or any college from the resources that the facebook offers – this is after all a product that is fun and useful for all college students.

*Your website was one of the first social networking sites to explicitly ground its online community to a physical one, and perhaps more importantly, to demonstrate the linkages that exist between different physical communities.*

That's why I think the website has been such a success. We don't view site as an online community – we bill it as a directory that is reinforcing a physical community. What exists on the site is a mirror image of what exists in real life.

*But at the same time, can't thefacebook distort people's perceptions of the real world?*

To a certain extent, the website is unfortunate because it oversimplifies things. Everybody's concept of having a friend is different... it can definitely blur the relationships that exist between people. But in the end, I think that thefacebook.com can only strengthen preexisting communities. We think we have been particularly successful in strengthening those relationships that exist between people who are only "fringe friends."

*So in your view, are there any negative aspects to the website?*

Oh sure, there are. It's not unusual for us to receive an email from somebody who is like, "I spend all of my time on your website and now I have less of a social life than I had before." But the website was never designed for that. We would much rather have people meet people through the website and go out and party than stay at home on a Friday night and read other people's profiles. And it's surprising, but we have actually received far less complaints about stalking than we otherwise would have expected.

*So how do you respond to people's concerns about their privacy?*

I support the free flow of information. That's actually a quote from my own profile, actually. Typically, the more information people have about the community that they live in, the better that community will operate. But at the same time, I don't want to make anybody uncomfortable with the amount of information they are sharing about oneself; that's why we have a wide range of privacy controls built into the site's framework.

*Have you benefited socially from the website?*

I would say that I get more out of making the site and hearing from people who have benefited from the site than actually using it. But the other weekend some friends and I were down in L.A. and we were able to throw an impromptu party after messaging some random people we didn't know at UCLA. That was pretty cool.

*What would you have to say to somebody who still shirks at the idea of using the site?*

I wouldn't want to impose thefacebook upon anybody. If you're actively choosing not to register for the service, that's cool - we simply want to insure that everybody who wants to can benefit from the connective power of the Internet.

*Other Quotes:*

It's not like keeping a blog; everybody can benefit socially from its features without investing a lot of time into the venture.

The website can definitely go both ways. One could use thefacebook to get out there and meet people, or it could be used to socially isolate oneself – spending all of his or her time being neurotic about their lack of friends.

But by all means, we never wanted this website to suck up people's lives.

We're definitely not in it for the money. We never realized how expensive the project would be and as a result, we now have to run some advertisements on the site. The website is now running on a total of 45 servers and has a over half a million users – with over 60% of those users coming back on a daily basis, and 95% of all users visiting the site at least once a month. Powering such an operation isn't the easiest of chores to do.

Yes and no. The website could have really been made at any school. The administration at Harvard was a motivation for making the site though because they were dragging their feet on the creation of a university-sanctioned student directory. I enjoy working with stuff – puttering around with computers and code –

What makes the site work isn't the code; anybody could have better graphics or more functionality... the site wins because of the network of people that we have. The network of people on our site in a sense is really the product that we are offering.

The site really has two modes of use – procrastination and utility. And while the freshness of browsing through people's profiles as a means to procrastinate may wear off, I don't necessarily know how the utility aspect of the site will ever go away – to find somebody's phone number for instance.

It would be nice but it probably won't ever get there... there's a lot more well-defined communities we can go into first. High schools, for instance. The great thing about our website is that it is grounded in physical communities that already exist in real life.

When you go international you really can't do it half-assed. We are building a product by necessity must be grounded in people's relationships with each other, and wherever we branch out to in the future we want to make sure that our users get the most out of our product.