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Facebook May Swell Its Ranks With Young 'Uns



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 E-Commerce Times
 06/05/12 1:25 PM PT

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Facebook may change its rule about minimum age for membership, allowing youngsters to officially join. That may be in part due to the fact that it's been impossible to enforce the restriction and in part because Facebook is hungrier than ever to enlarge its already-enormous base. Whether adding a bunch of kid users will translate into a

revenue boost is the question.

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Facebook is exploring ways to include children younger than 13 years of age as members of its social network, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. To that end, it is working on developing technology that would allow tweens to be active on the site under parental supervision.

Facebook's move in this direction -- if it is indeed going down this road -- is understandable. It is widely realized that there are legions of children under 13 on Facebook already, a number of whom are there with parental permission.

Breaking the Rules

"Many parents break the rules and allow their children on Facebook because they don't want their child to be left out socially," observed April Masini, author of the [Ask April](#) advice column and several dating books.

Of course, by signing up children and officially counting them as members, Facebook will be able to continue to point to growth -- an all-important accountability metric for Wall Street, said Mike Poller, principal of [Poller & Jordan Advertising](#).

"Facebook just needs to keep the registered user numbers on an upward slope," he told the E-Commerce Times.

Nothing Definite

Facebook, for its part, hasn't confirmed any hard-and-fast decisions about allowing children to sign up for accounts.

"Many recent reports have highlighted just how difficult it is to enforce age restrictions on the Internet, especially when parents want their children to access online content and services," the company said in a statement provided to the E-Commerce Times by spokesperson Andrew Noyes. "We are in continuous dialogue with stakeholders, regulators and other policymakers about how best to help parents keep their kids safe in an evolving online environment."

Clearly there are risks for Facebook if it allows tweens to sign up.

"Young children are not mature enough to understand the consequences to their actions -- like posting too much information or sexy photos of themselves and of others," Masini told the E-Commerce Times. "Let's face it, many adults have proven unable to comprehend the ramifications of doing so. Also, social networking sites open the doors to child predators, inappropriate content, and increased vulnerability to becoming a victim or a perpetrator of bullying."

It is hard to understand how Facebook could truly carve out a protected area on its site for tweens, especially since there are so many young people on the site already, said Torin Dorros, an attorney with [Michelman & Robinson](#).

"I don't really believe the concept that the child memberships will be subject to more restrictive access will truly address the privacy concerns for which they are supposedly being implemented," he told the E-Commerce Times.

The underlying problem is that people, including adults, are willing to lie to set up an account, Dorros said. "I'm not sure simply creating the ability to set up more restricted child accounts will significantly curb the creation of 'adult' accounts by kids or by adults for their kids."

Narbs for the Junior Set

All that said, the advantages of a child-friendly Facebook account -- for Facebook at least -- clearly outweigh the risks of parental disapproval from some users, or of Facebook becoming an online venue in which children are at risk.

The coin of the realm for Facebook is the narrative bits -- or narbs -- of its users, said Ananda Mitra, chair of the department of communication at [Wake Forest University](#).

"It is not as if only teens and older people tell stories in real life, so the move by Facebook to create Facebook Junior is a move to provide the true digital natives -- the elementary and middle school kids of 2011 -- an opportunity to nab," he told the E-Commerce Times.

"The more nabs one has, the greater the ability to create identity narratives or profiles," Mitra explained. "And the earlier one gets the opportunity to nab, the chances are greater that they will continue to do so for the rest of their lives -- which will offer Facebook significant amounts of information about them." **ECT**



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