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# Mobile war over social networking

By Victoria Shannon

Published: March 6, 2008

**PARIS:** Social networks may be nothing new to habitués of the Internet. Several years of intense competition between Facebook, MySpace and Friendster have generated tens of millions of members.

But now the market is teeming with companies that want to bring the same phenomenon to the mobile phone. There are so many "mobile social networking" upstarts, in fact, that when New Media Age magazine surveyed the field to identify just the "ones to watch," it ended up naming 10 companies with wide potential.

Some of those in the thick of battle are resigned to having a lot of company. "If there weren't competitors, there wouldn't be a market," said Dan Harple, founder and chief executive of Gypsii, a mobile social network based in Amsterdam that is one of the contenders. "Maybe there are 30 or more now - in three years, there will be five that matter."

The prize, as these start-ups see it, is the 3.3 billion mobile phone subscribers around the world, a number that far surpasses the total of Internet surfers. Their advantage over the computer-based communities, they believe, is the cellphone's innate ability to know where it is, thanks to global positioning satellites and related technologies.

Informa Telecoms said in a report last month that about 50 million people, or about 2.3 percent of the global population of mobile users, are already using the cellphone for social networking, from chat services to multimedia sharing. The market research company forecast that the penetration rate would mushroom to at least 12.5 percent in the next five years.

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Most of the mobile social networks seek to capitalize on location information. Gypsii's SpaceMe service, for instance, will show you where your friends and other members are in real time.

If you do a Gypsii search, it will show you a map of your environs dotted with photos, videos and information from other members.

Bliin, another network that started in Amsterdam, lets its users update and post their whereabouts every 15 seconds, a trail that can then be followed as dots on a map.

But for other networks, geography and "presence" information is not as critical. MyGamma, a social network run by BuzzCity, based in Singapore, draws most of its 2.5 million users from developing countries in Asia and Africa, according to Lai Kok Fung, its chief executive.

"These are countries with low Internet penetration - they are not PC-centric," Lai said. "For our members, the mobile phone is the only way to get on the Internet."

For that reason, Lai is not overly concerned with the big Internet names - like MySpace and Facebook - and their plans to invade the cellphone universe as well.

AOL, Yahoo and Nokia have their own initiatives to create discrete communities out of mobile phone users.

"We don't think any of them will make a big splash in the mobile space," Lai said. "They view mobile as an extension of the online site, while we know our members use mobile much differently."

According to a BuzzCity study, for instance, members usually gain access to the mobile social network from home or from work, not in transit, and they use their cellphone first, even if they can get to the network from a personal computer. For the majority of users - 62 percent - each myGamma session lasts 30 minutes to an hour.

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Gypsii announced this week a version of its software for the Apple iPhone, and concluded a contract last month with China Unicom to start Gypsii during the Beijing Olympics.

Harple, an American and a technology entrepreneur, does not consider it unusual that so many of the mobile social networks originate outside the United States, which has dominated the Internet business.

"I moved to Europe because I thought the U.S. venture capital community - which I was a part of - was myopic," he said. "I would explain it to U.S. venture firms, and they'd say, 'Huh?' I'd talk about the potential in China, and they'd say, 'Why would you do China, why don't you do Verizon?'"

"That's when I decided they just didn't get it," he said. "They can't see the global significance of what is happening."

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