

Google+ Equals? (Aug 11)

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Will + be the new @? It would be premature for me (or anyone else, for that matter) to answer that question with accuracy. There are pros and cons, hype, excitement, and innovation with Google Plus. However the argument of its fans that Google+ is equivalent to a WMD for Facebook is hardly relevant or constructive for users.

We, the users, are benefiting by the innovative approaches and new applications that both services are offering as they compete to gain access to our social stream. In this column, I'll provide an overview of Google+ and its features. (If you would like an invite to Google+, I am happy to send you one – see my contact information in my bio.)

Friend management in Google+: Circles

The pride of Google+ is its friend management system. The official name is “Circles.” Circles are a way for you to organize the social stream of your followers, based upon your own personal criteria. The premise behind this is that you don't always want to hear from all your followers. Some followers will have a certain level of relevance over others.

Circles allow you to sort them accordingly. (Figure 1) You may be saying, “I can do that on Facebook with Groups and on Twitter with Lists.” You would be right. The difference with Google Circles is that it is a default setting and it is simpler to do than the other two (for now). Remember too that Google+ is in beta, so improvements are sure to come. You can also name your circles creatively. A connection only knows they are in a circle and not which circle you put them in (i.e. the “Annoying People” circle).

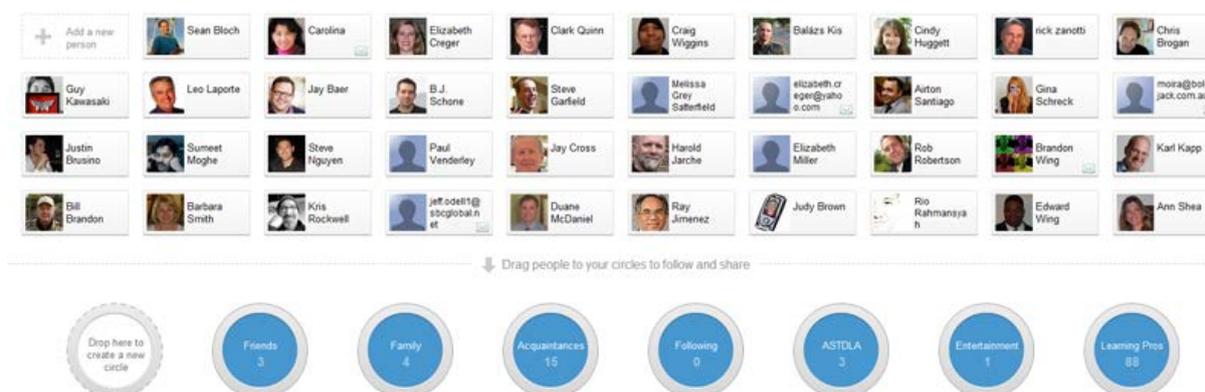


Figure 1: Circles provide the means to organize your communication in Google +.

Hangout: media-rich gathering place

The second Google+ feature that is gaining buzz (no pun intended) is the Hangout feature. This allows for spontaneous media-rich gatherings of your friends.

Once you install Google Voice and video you are well on your way. Hangout allows you and your invitees to collaborate and share using your Webcams. (Figure 2) It is similar to Skype. A Webcam is not necessary, but it does make for a richer experience.

Hangout is simple and quick to use. You can integrate chat and share YouTube videos. It would be great if it had a screen sharing feature and a way to record the session but currently no luck with that. (Note that Facebook has a Tinychat app coming out soon which gives it the same functionality as Hangout, according to TechCrunch.com <http://tinyurl.com/6jusefp>)



Figure 2: Hangout offers a multimedia space for collaboration and sharing.

Sparks: a news stream you can call your own

Sparks is another tool that helps you organize and filter information about your interests. We probably would all agree that it makes sense for Google to use its incredible search capabilities in Google+. Sparks allows you to select your topics of interest and create a relevant news stream that you can access easily from your Google+ home page. (Figure 3) If you are interested in eLearning, skydiving, Adobe products, or anything else for that matter, Sparks helps you get the latest info by searching the Internet for that topic. I don't know Google's algorithm for Sparks, but chances are we'll start seeing sponsored URLs from advertisers soon enough. Despite that potential, Sparks still gets a cool factor score.

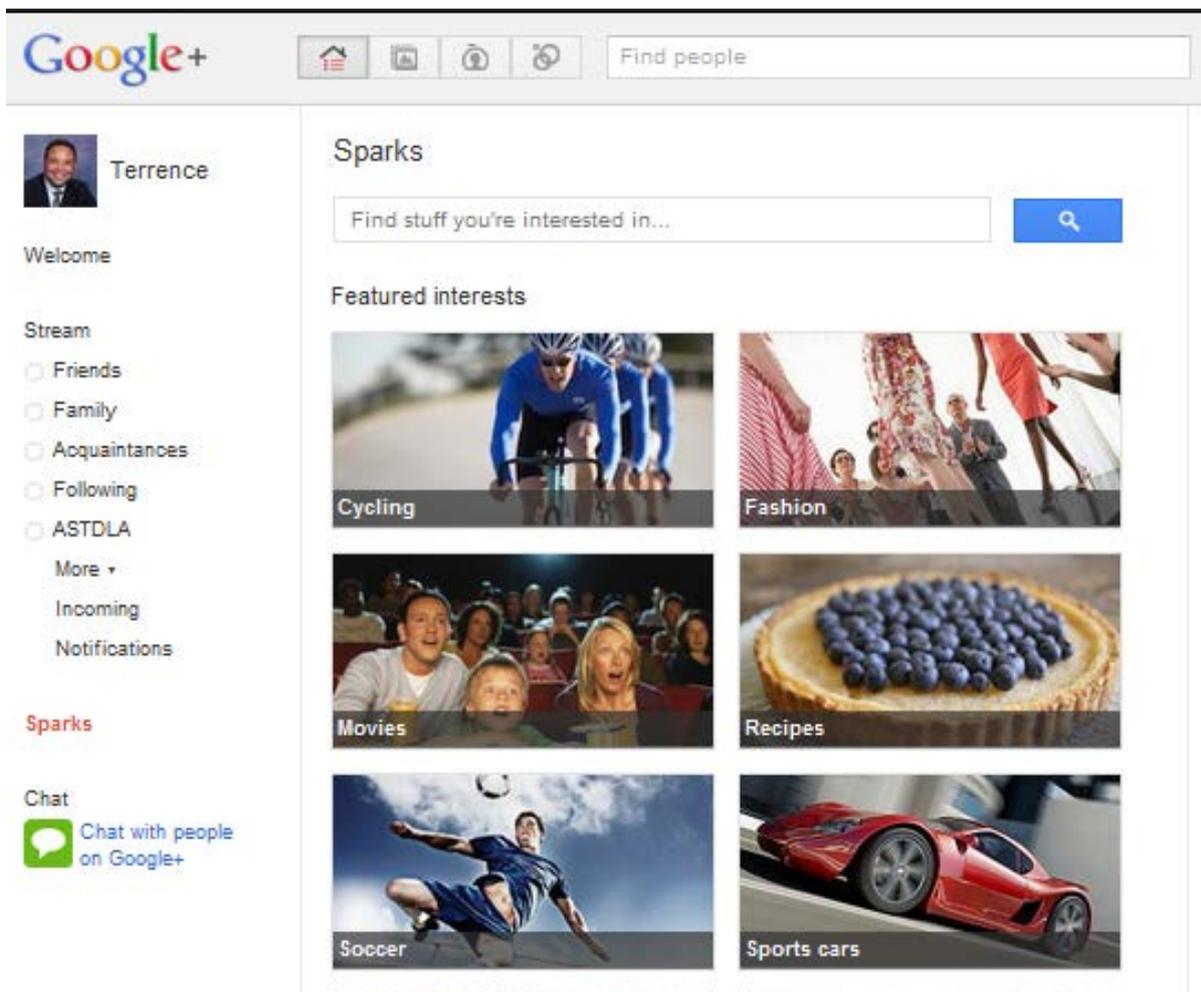


Figure 3: Sparks is a personalized news-stream application within Google+.

Déjà vu

As you look at the Google+ home page, you may find yourself having Facebook flashbacks. The page is almost identical. It sports three columns. The left column is your profile picture followed by your Circles and Sparks. The center column is the news feed of those you follow. The right column contains pictures of people you follow, suggestions, and function tools such as Hangout and Invite. I would assume this column will (inevitably) include ads.

The newsfeed on Google+ is a typical social interface with the exception of the information management via Circles (as we discussed previously). Like Facebook, Google+'s newsfeed is media-rich. You can attach a photo, URL, video, and a location. Each post becomes searchable content; this is important to note if you are interested in SEO (search engine optimization). Also, each post is its own unique URL; you can access the URL by clicking on the date of the post. This function is identical to Facebook.

What's it all mean?

There are too many features and benefits to fit into this one article. My purpose was to give you a brief overview of Google+ with as much objectivity as possible. I believe we can never have too many social networking sites, and so I welcome Google to the party. The company is pouring the dollars into development and that is great for users. The mobile app is really streamlined as well and worth a mention here. Google seems to have learned from their earlier failed attempts at breaching the social networking market. Users are benefitting, and I suspect that the Facebook vs. Google+ argument will become the likes of the Pepsi vs. Coke argument.