Chapter X

Cember.net

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Abstract

Inception of the Internet leads to emergence of online communities in the virtual space where spatial proximity and time are no longer constraints in establishing and developing relationships. Online social networks are online communities basically providing a channel through which information about potential social and economic exchange opportunities can be presented, searched, and leveraged by the network members. The distinguishing features of a social networking site are the use of explicit representation of member-provided information and relationships between members, thus embedding trust and referral mechanisms into the network. Cember.net, a Turkey-based online business networking start-up provides a platform through which its members can locate potential economic exchange partners. However, Cember.net differentiates its business model from those of major online competitors by incorporating means to foster social interactions and exchanges. Cember.net, with its continually growing member base, presents networking opportunities to its members by not only advancing the quantity of relationships but the quality of the relationships as well.

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Background

The number of Internet users increased from 16 million to 1,018 million between December 1995 and December 2005.\footnote{The rapid growth of the Internet created many new business opportunities for entrepreneurs. A new breed of innovative Internet business venture creators called “netrepreneurs” have influenced the way people live, learn, work, and do business. The most common Internet-related business models can be classified as development of software and hardware applications, selling products and services, customer service and support, public and investor relations, and providing information or advice. As online technologies proliferate and diversify, the influence of the Internet extends beyond mere economic exchanges to the social domain of interactions.}

Creating social networks based on virtual communities is another attractive business model not only for entrepreneurs but also for existing companies seeking to enhance their business through the Internet. Likewise, non-profit organizations also start virtual communities in order to exploit the opportunities offered by Internet technology.

In traditional forms of social networks, the participants are friends, neighbors, people working together, and members of clubs or special organizations (Lea, Yu, Maguluru, & Nichols, 2006). Face-to-face relationships between such social network members are constrained by physical location and time. Different types of traditional networks provide benefits limited in scope to their members based on the members’ common interests and shared goals.

The removal of physical boundaries through Internet technology both advances the relationships among members of a community and enables members of a network to contact members of other communities. In virtual social networks, time is no longer a constraining factor in developing new relationships. Therefore, the probability of reaching more people through the Internet is higher than that offered by traditional forms of interaction. Terveen and McDonald (2005) describe online communities as “social spaces built on technologies such as chat rooms, newsgroups, and bulletin boards where people go to discuss topics that interest them and to meet others” (p. 408). Online community platforms are indeed “exchange facilitators” promoting and structuring social and economic exchange opportunities between members.

The member population of online communities tends to increase at unprecedented rates soon after a well-planned and managed community Web site is launched, as exemplified in the case of an online business networking venture, LinkedIn (Hoyt, 2004).