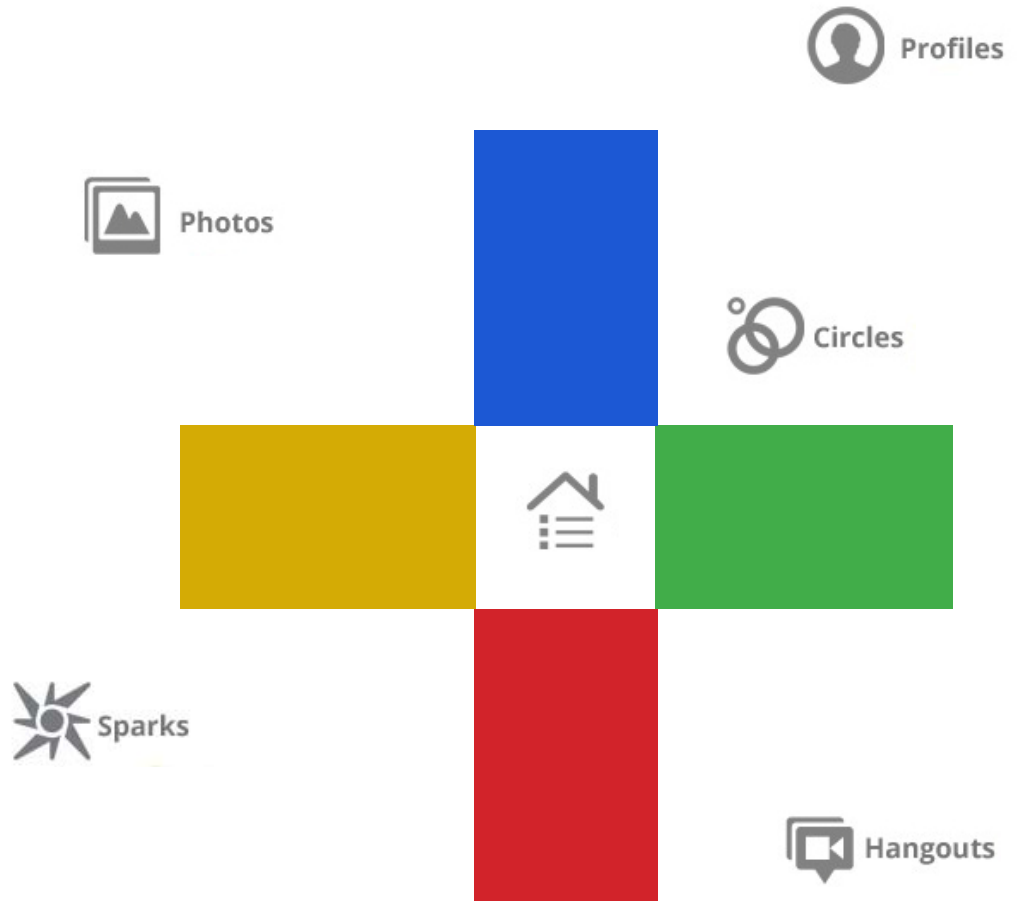


An Early Overview of Google+ as a Content Marketing Platform

By Rex Hammock | July 21, 2011



About this eBrief

Three weeks into a pre-launch trial period, Google+ (pronounced, Google-Plus) is Google's most recent attempt (after numerous failures) to become a major player in social networking. Google+ is attracting lots of users and lots of hype. This eBrief is intended for business executives who are not techies, but who have asked us to explain what Google+ is and, more importantly, how it might integrate into their organizations' current content marketing strategies.

About the Author

Rex Hammock is ceo of Hammock Inc., the company he founded in 1991. He is one of the co-founders of the Custom Content Council, the largest and oldest content marketing and custom media trade association in the U.S. He has helped launch and publish dozens of award-winning, nationally-distributed magazines and web-based properties. As an editor and writer, he is winner of the American Business Media's Jesse H. Neal award and the ASBPE's National Editorial Award for best magazine business columnist. His decade-old blog, RexBlog.com, is read by over 30,000 each month and his Twitter account, @R is followed by over 7,000. He is creator and "head helper" of the large-scale wiki resource, SmallBusiness.com. He speaks regularly at conferences and on campuses across the country about media, marketing and technology. [Reach Rex on Google+: RexHammock.com/+]

About Hammock Inc.

Hammock is a custom media and marketing services company based in Nashville, Tenn., serving clients nationwide. We advise the leaders of companies and organizations on how to use a wide array of content and media to develop strategies to achieve their specific business objectives. We work with clients to develop, , manage and measure the ongoing performance of activities, programs and projects that are included in such strategies. [Find us at Hammock.com]

About Hammock Labs

Hammock Labs is a team of people who work for and with Hammock. We test, analyze and adapt or adopt new technology and new media platforms that enable the media and marketing strategies our clients use to reach their business objectives.

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Table of Contents

- 5** Introduction
- 7** What is Google+? (And why that's not the important question)
- 9** What can you do with Google+?
- 10** Who can use Google+?
- 11** How Google+ is like (and not like) Facebook
- 13** How Google+ is like (and not like) Twitter
- 14** How Google+ is like (and not like) LinkedIn
- 14** How will people have enough time to use all these social networking things?
- 15** How will I (or my company) have enough time to use all these social networking things?
- 16** The coolest “new, new” things about Google+
- 17** The early “missing” things about Google+
- 20** Predictions for Google+
- 22** Short-term recommendations for businesses and the people who run them
- 24** Conclusion: Our most confident prediction

Introduction

At Hammock, we tell clients to wait until a content distribution channel or technology platform has reached a broad-based “tipping point” of adoption among their customer-base before integrating it into their content marketing strategy. While I’m known personally for being an early tire-kicker of anything new, as a company, we encourage our clients to focus their marketing efforts on what their customers and prospects are currently using — not on spending time trying to follow the latest fad.

Therefore, issuing this eBrief about Google+, a new web service that is (as this is being written) less than three weeks into what Google calls a *Field Trial* is unprecedentedly early for Hammock. However, it is also unprecedented for me to receive so many questions from business executives who are users of technology, but who live and work outside the tech and social-media bubble.

Because of such curiosity, we’ve decided to issue this overview for our clients and others who are interested in learning more about Google+ — especially, what attention it deserves immediately for their content marketing activities.

I need to stress something for my early social media tire-kicking friends: This overview is intended for tech users, *not* tech developers. It is intended for business executives, not social media experts.

I intended it to be an early simple-to-understand overview of a service that has *not yet officially launched*. It is not a how-to and it does not include recommendations related to the action of any brand-oriented uses of Google+. It does, however, contain my opinions which are easily balanced with

those of many others who are using the service who will, no doubt, disagree with my opinions.

The truth is, no one can predict exactly what Google+ will be one day. It has some great features that early adopters love — a few that are truly awesome and without match. And there are many who believe having a viable alternative (or complement) to such services as Twitter and Facebook will help make all such services better. Competition is a good thing.

In the long run, *users* will determine the success of Google+. They will determine what's good about it, and if Google is listening (and I think they are, this time), the service will evolve in ways we may not be able to see today. Your customers may be among that group that embraces Google+ early — or they may never find the need to use it. That is why, in this eBrief, we have no universal answers: just a universal recommendation that you watch and learn from, and with, your customers.

Before you can succeed in connecting with your customers via Google+, your customers must first decide that Google+ is, indeed, a “plus” in their lives.



Rex Hammock
July 18, 2011

What is Google+? (And why that's not the important question.)

Starting about two decades ago, I started being asked to give presentations to different types of organizations about new technology and the impact it may have on, well, whatever group I was speaking to. These started so long ago, the first ones were variations on the theme, “What is the internet?”

After a few of these “what is this new technology?” presentations, I came up with a line that has worked for me ever since; one that people seem to understand: “New technology is like the telephone — it is not important to know what it *is*, it's important to know *what it is you can do with it.*”

Most people are “users” of technology and not really that passionate about technology, itself.

We're more interested in what we can do with technology than in how technology works. Users view technology as a means to an end — we don't (or shouldn't) get obsessed with the technology, itself. We just want it to work because we want the results of it working.

I agree with those who say great technology should be invisible to the user: using a technology should be so intuitive and obvious to the user, and so effective in accomplishing the desired result, that the technology, itself, should disappear.

A great example of this is today's TV: We rarely think of it in terms of technology — unless it malfunctions. We turn it on and watch.

So, in this eBrief, I am going to skip a deep-dive into all of the features of Google+ and merely say these few things:

Google+ is a web service you access using the web browser on your computer desktop or via an app on a mobile device.

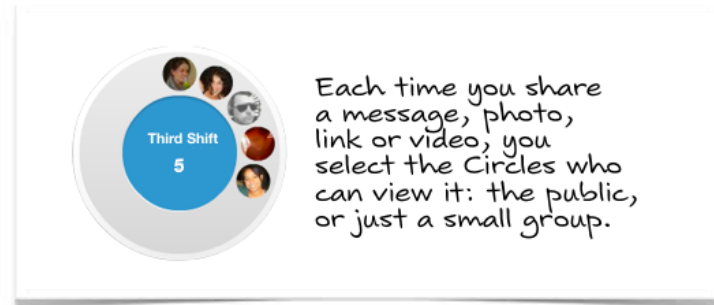
Google+ is a simple way to subscribe to a stream of content shared by people (and soon, companies or products) you want to keep up with.

Google+ is a simple way to distribute different types of content to different kinds of people.

Google+ is a simple way to organize into categories (called Circles) the various types of people (and soon, companies or products) you'd like to hear from, send to or communicate with.

Google+ is a free and simple way to launch real-time, group, video conferencing — currently, for up to ten participants.

Google+ is a work in progress that will one day include a wide array of ways to connect with small and large groups for content distribution, communicating and collaborating in ways that can be adapted to both work and personal use.



What can you do with Google+?

If, as I suggest in the previous section, it is more important to know *what you can do with* Google+ than to know what it *is*, the logical question is just that: What can you do with it? Well, you can do many of the same things you already do with other services like Facebook or Twitter — or email, for that matter. What makes Google+ different is the flexibility and superior usability that's baked into the platform that allows you to do a long list of things easily and intuitively, like:

- Rather than use email to bounce back-and-forth messages with a person or group, open up a page that works like a threaded message forum — but just for the people you choose for the duration you determine.
- Post messages like you would on a blog or Twitter, but instead of the message being public, limit its distribution to the specific person or people you permit to see and respond to it. And each time you post a different message, you can designate different individuals who can see them. That means, golfing posts go to golfing buddies and work-related posts go to co-workers.
- Launch a video conference for up to ten other people — by just clicking.
- Search across your connections, or the entire universe of Google+ users, to discover people who may be your customers or know something unique about a topic on which you have a special interest.

- Organize a means to text message groups who may want to receive topic-specific real-time messages.
- As with Facebook, share photos, videos or any type of message with customers who subscribe to such information.

As this is an eBrief and not a how-to manual, I'll have to warn you: If you go to Google+ today, some of these “things Google+ can do” require an understanding of how any social networking service works. Google+ makes it easy, but there's a learning curve.

Who can use Google+?

If you have a Gmail account (the type that looks like: yourname@gmail.com), you can log into Google+. Currently, during its *Field Trial*, Google is using a method called “scarcity marketing” to build up the user-base of Google+. Google now requires a new user to have an “invitation” from someone who is already a user. Since Google claims there are already nearly 20 million users, “scarcity” is not very much of a problem, so finding someone who can invite you shouldn't be that difficult. However, if you'd like an invitation and you already have a Gmail account, use it to email a request to Labs@Hammock.com.

How Google+ is like (and not like) Facebook

Facebook is, and will likely be for a long, long time, the 800 lb. gorilla of social networking. For certain demographic groups and different types of marketers Facebook is not only the dominant social network, it is the dominant form of communication and channel of marketing *of any kind*. It is not only a U.S. phenomenon, it is a global powerhouse.

However, for other demographic groups and types of marketers, Facebook doesn't work.

Here's what I mean: Consumer products and entertainment (movies, music) have found great success on Facebook. On the other hand, business-to-business products and services have not been as successful. Many companies ban Facebook from their workplaces — not a great feature if you sell an industrial product to a customer base of specifying engineers.

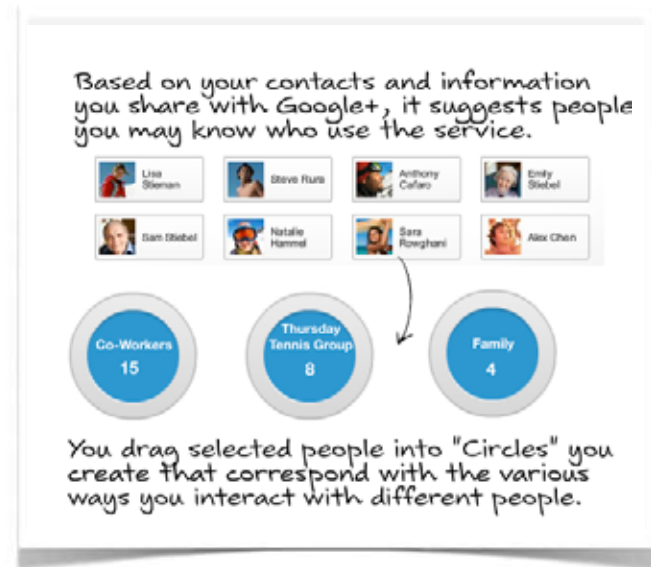
Google+, however, is not burdened with the legacy of once being a less-than-serious social networking service. Facebook is still burdened with the legacy of being used initially by college students to post photos of themselves at weekend parties.

Free from the burden of such frivolous DNA, Google+ can focus on many aspects of social networking that business executives think is productive and meaningful to the bottomline. For instance, business leaders think positively about things that enable the creation of affinity groups of customers or employees. Google+ can also help business executives overcome the kinds of things they may consider (whether accurate or not) negative about social networking: That employees hang out all day on Facebook sharing photos of their cats, for example. Despite the media's

obsession with Google's challenge to Facebook, from the moment you log onto Google+, you'll be extremely aware that it is very different from Facebook: For example, its user interface is brilliant, a term I can't recall ever using to describe a user interface. On the accompanying screen shot, you can see how a user simply drags a "card" representing another user of Google+ into a Circle that you name. You can place someone in as many Circles as you'd like. All interaction with Circles are done with such drag and drop ease — and, if you do something like delete a Circle, fun surprises (we'll not spoil the surprise) punctuate the interaction with the service. *Fun* is also not a way I typically describe a user interface of a potential business tool. But Google+ has a fun interface.

Google+ is not burdened with the need to cobble together all of the legacy features of Facebook that make little sense today (for instance, what is "poking"?).

But on the other hand, Facebook is ubiquitous and universal, so *not* being Facebook is *not* necessarily a good thing. It may be harder for Google+ to attract a large, global network of users than it will be for Facebook to adopt from features useful too businesses.



How Google+ is like (and not like) Twitter

I don't mean to sound glib when saying the following, but here's my honest assessment of how different people will compare Google+ with Twitter:

If you never *got* Twitter, you'll likely get Google+.

If you're addicted to Twitter, you'll wonder why people are even comparing Google+ to it.

While Google+ is very different from Twitter, the benefit to the user can be the same: instant real-time access to breaking news (on any topic, big or small) and the conversation surrounding such real-time content flow.

Google+ has conversational tools I believe most non-techy web users will find far superior to Twitter (unless they hang out on Twitter a lot). The conversational tools and features of Google+ are more like Facebook than Twitter — structured and threaded and in a context that helps facilitate conversation.

Twitter is not, however, a conversation tool for many, if not most, of its users: it's a headline and link distribution channel for many. Twitter has become the infrastructure for distributing certain types of short, text-message compatible content that, for some people and some usages, is as significant as the internet, itself. Twitter, because it is baked into so many websites and other web services, oftenserves as a form of content syndication and distribution invisible to the end user. For content marketers, Twitter is a key distribution channel for getting the word out to those who are most engaged with your product or service.

Google+ will, for some, make Twitter seem redundant. But for those who have learned to depend on Twitter to keep up with sports or activities at their children's school or *New York Times* headlines — or your business — Google+ will not likely disrupt Twitter's dominance any time soon.

How Google+ is like (and not like) LinkedIn

While LinkedIn benefited from being described as a social network during its recent IPO, I believe there are relatively few people who use it like Facebook's interpretation of a social network — a place to hang out or carry-on long-running asynchronous conversations and real-time chat. LinkedIn Groups may serve as a great platform for certain types of business-oriented group hosting, but most users depend on the service for other, specific types of networking.

LinkedIn's strength and niche dominance is displayed in how it enables an individual to keep up with business contacts or find and recruit new employees. It may serve as a community place for some of its users, but a new form of resumé hosting and sharing is how most of those we've researched position it.

While LinkedIn and Google+ will both end up being viewed as business tools (compared to the perception that Twitter and Facebook as consumer-oriented), I believe LinkedIn is distinctly different from Google+. I've seen the punditry suggesting otherwise, but nothing in my research and usage suggests Google+ will be a threat to LinkedIn's core strengths. While there may be some redundant features, their key features and core strengths do not significantly overlap.

How will people have enough time to use all these social networking things?

They won't. The total amount of time in the day is a pie-chart with only a small slice available for social networking. Social networking should be, at least in business, a means to generate more productivity and efficiency. For some, such a statement seem outlandish, but having the

collective brain power of 18,000 Twitter followers (combined on my two accounts, @R and @SmallBusiness) has saved me hours of research on numerous occasions. And just one tweet over two years ago resulted in a response (and professional relationship) that has freed hours of my time, each week and saves our clients money, as well. Nonetheless, something will have to give: For business-oriented users, I predict Google+ may eventually take away attention from Facebook and Twitter. It won't "kill" them — just encroach on their share of certain users attention. As the overall marketplace of potential social network users is still relatively small (despite what you are led to believe), there is still room for growth for Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Google+ (and an endless array of niche and category-specific platforms and services).

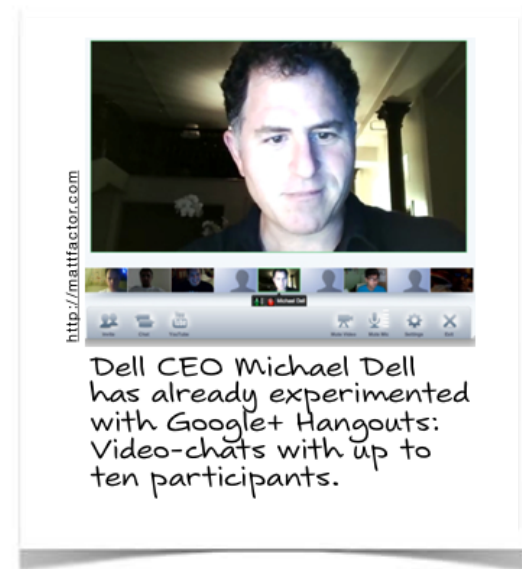
How will a company have enough time to use all these social networking things?

There are already several great third-party (created by companies other than the social networks themselves) dashboards for managing multiple social networking platforms simultaneously. I anticipate they will incorporate the monitoring and management of Google+ accounts into their platforms. It is important also to understand how your specific customer audience uses social networking. If, for example, you have a youthful and consumer-oriented audience, Google+ should not be a priority immediately, as Facebook will continue to dominate that audience for the foreseeable future. If you have a business-to-business, professional audience, Google+ may enter your work flow sooner, than later. Google+ will not replace Twitter for customers who want to keep

up with the announcements or alerts you send out regarding special news, information or specials. Over time, however, some of the conversational tweeting may migrate to Google+. (More than likely, this will be determined by how a specific company and its customers use Twitter — not because of any difference in the technology.)

What are the coolest “new, new” things about Google+?

In addition to the user interface and the overall ease of use of the site, I believe the most impressive feature is an incredibly simple-to-use video conferencing feature called “Hangouts.” Right now, it’s being touted as a place to set up random video chats with up to ten other Google+ users. However, the same feature could be easily adapted for work-related private video conferencing with employees, customers or any group. It works cross platform (Mac, PC) and will, no doubt, soon work via any device that connects with the internet.



The early negative things about Google+?

It's really not that productive to judge a newly launched web project by what it *does not have*, however, that's a typical past time of early adopters. Despite the likelihood that the obvious missing elements will be rolled out within days, early adopters, you may have heard, love to whine. The Google+ development team seems actively engaged with the users and there are bug fixes and new features coming online constantly. Also, Google+ has been in the works for over a year and its employees have tested an internal version of it for months. It is surprisingly robust to be new — as Google is known for releasing things that are less-than-ready for release.

However, here are just a few things I consider missing now:

No support for Google Apps for Business users: Google+ doesn't yet work for Google's customers who are spending \$50 per year per employee for its product called Google Apps for Business — companies that use Gmail, but with an address that looks like @hammock.com. Google has invested heavily in efforts to crack the enterprise cloud office-suite software market. The company says that three million businesses now use Google Apps for Business which means, as it relates to Google+, there are employees at three million companies who have Gmail accounts, but not the type of Gmail account that works with Google+.

Identity: The best recommendation I give marketers and individuals about any marketing activity they do on the web is this: Own your own identity. This means, while it's okay to use Facebook,

Twitter and Google+ for content marketing, don't fall into the trap of thinking that what you do on their web sites belongs to you. Your company can certainly benefit from what you do on Facebook, but the reality is this: Facebook.com/YourCompany is not your brand. It may support your brand, but it's not yours.

Neither is anything that will be under the banner of Google+. However, if (when) Google+ is available for Google Apps customers, there may very well exist the ability to integrate Google+ into services that reside on the domain names you own.

Fortunately, some of the people Google recruited to help develop Google+ are leaders in movements advocating user-focused positions related to the portability and privacy of personal data. The company is well aware that Facebook and Twitter (and Google, at times) have made some significant missteps when it comes to issues related to identity (and, for that matter, privacy and the control of users' personal data). Early signs seem to indicate Google+ could use the portability of data and the ability to map domains (use YourDomain.com as a domain name on a hosted web site as one can do on another Google service, Blogger.com) as differentiating points between it and Twitter or Facebook.

Google+ doesn't have "X": In his 20-year-old book, *Crossing the Chasm*, Geoffrey A. Moore described the challenges faced by innovators who develop products intended eventually for a mass market of consumers — but that must first withstand the rigors of being tested and reviewed by early-adopting power-using pundits (like me, I confess). In the coming weeks and months, Google+

must strive to please early adopters (who, by nature, are never pleased — and, as Moore points out, are also the least loyal customers imaginable as they have to move on to the next new thing). However, long term mass appeal requires Google to keep the service simple enough to eventually attract the huge group of consumers Moore terms *laggards*.

In the long run, Google+ will be successful based on how well it does things laggards want to do, not on whether or not it has features early adopters want. However, the cool features early adopters want are necessary to keep the hype alive until Google+ has staying power. How hard is that balancing act? A glimpse of it could be seen when Google released the Google+ iPhone app and certain alpha-tech-early-adopters discovered it doesn't have everything they thought it should have.

Social media fatigue: While some of us (Hammock Labs people are all raising their hands) are never tired of trying out (at least for a few minutes), any next new thing that comes along, I also know there is a significant investment of time and effort necessary to really master a new content distribution, community or collaborative platform. Google has an advantage in this area as most web users have, perhaps unknowingly, provided it with a great deal of information about who they are and with whom they have relationships. And, despite conventional wisdom, the early birds may get the worm — but who wants to eat worms? Google has had an eternity to learn from the successes and mistakes of Twitter and Facebook. Making social networking easier and more understandable — especially in a business context — could be one of the lessons they learned from such observation.

Predictions for Google+

First, I'll confess: these are guesses, not predictions. I learned a long time ago that predictions about what Google products will succeed and fail are rarely determined during the first few months of their appearance. However, going out on a limb, I'll say:

1 Google+ will be a big success as a business-oriented product — even an enterprise employee-to-employee product. Ironically, I can't find many pundits who are even looking at Google+ as an enterprise product. One reason that I touched on in a previous section: it doesn't work yet with Google Apps, the company's cloud software suite. When (not if, but when) Google+ gets fully integrated into the Google Apps product line and as third-party developers find ways to incorporate into their services such Google+ features as Circles and the mobile-feature called *Huddles*, I believe Google will have a clear advantage over other players in the cloud-based enterprise office-suite market (most notably, Microsoft).

2 Google+ will attract adult consumers who think having a Facebook account is ridiculous. I didn't say I think having a Facebook account is ridiculous — I'm talking about that guy everyone knows. Just ask your brother-in-law — he hates it. (I say brother-in-law, but you can use any non-geeky relative you'd like.)

3 Google+ won't have much impact on Twitter or LinkedIn. This seems like a very counter-intuitive prediction because, like with everything in the web-tech world, the Google+ launch is being framed by the media as a *killer* of other products. I believe Twitter and LinkedIn serve different purposes than Google+. While there is a Venn Diagram overlap of certain features, marketers and consumers (both business and retail customers) will perceive the functions of each platform and channel as being unique.

4 I think Google+ is a bigger threat to Facebook than any other social networking player, but more so in the business-to-business arena than in the consumer arena. This is a topic I will explore in greater detail with future analysis, but I have confidence in this prediction. And, while all the hype seems to be focused on how Google is using + to battle Facebook, I believe Google will also use it in their battle over cloud services with Microsoft.

5 Google+ will be a big hit with small businesses. The reasons are based on my belief (based on literally thousands of conversations with small business owners) that small business owners do not start businesses because they want to use technology. It comes as a surprise to most suppliers of small business technology, but business owners typically view technology as a hassle and burden and something that keeps them away from what their business really is. Google+ was clearly developed as technology for people who don't like technology — a playing card out of Apple's deck.

6 Google+ has the opportunity of being the most open social network if it allows users to be a part of the Google+ network using their own identities — the identities they, not Google, own and control. I hope they make use of this opportunity. I hope they use it to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Everyday, we participate in a social media network that allows us to have our own identity, one that belongs to us, exclusively — it's called email and no matter whether your address ends with @hammock.com or @gmail.com, it works just the same. We should be able to participate in social networks without having to give up the brands we own and the addresses we control.

Short-term recommendations for businesses and the people who run them

Let Google's term *Field Trial* be your guide. Even with Google behind it, Google+ is not assured of success. More importantly, your "company-time" and budget are better spent now focused on serving your customers where they are found, currently.

As an individual, however, do like we do at Hammock Labs: Experiment!

Set up a personal Google+ account (you need a Gmail account and an easy-to-get invitation) and get to know first what *Circles* mean and how they work. (The other features, like Hangouts can be put off until later.) If you have a Gmail account and need an invitation, email us: Labs@Hammock.com and I'll send you one.

A word of caution (especially, if you are reading this in the early days of the trial period during July, 2011): Don't set up a Google+ business account, as Google has already promised a specific brand or business account will be available soon.

That Google+ didn't have such brand accounts available from the beginning is a controversial topic among early adopters from the social media marketing community. Personally, I think marketers should learn a new service as a user before using a new service as a marketer.

Anticipate that third party social media dashboard services like Hootsuite, Seesmic or CoTweet will find ways to integrate Google+ into their services, allowing you to manage and monitor Google+ activity from the same place you already can manage Facebook and Twitter — and not require additional overhead in content creation, curation or moderation. That won't be the best use of Google+, but for some markets and some marketers, it might be enough to get you started.

If your audience is a business or professional audience, you need to start asking customers if

they have a Google+ account. If your marketplace moves quickly into Google+, be there waiting. However, I have some doubts as to the velocity Google+ will be adopting as a professional. (Not if, but how soon.) Some of this has to do with Google+'s tight integration with Gmail, a service that is still, in the enterprise, not widely used in Microsoft-dominated companies. However, some of the features of Google+ will be hard for small groups of workers to resist.

The internet moves fast, but it's also a marathon.

Conclusion

Our most confident predication

Despite my best attempt to predict the level of success Google+ will achieve as a platform marketers can use for building long-lasting relationships with customers, my experience provides the humility and insight necessary for me to say this: Google+ will succeed or fail for reasons probably not highlighted in this early eBrief.

Why?

When it comes to social anything, the most important product innovations come from the way people use it "in the wild," what developers call tech products that have left the building.

The success of any media, especially social media, is, in the end, about people — not technology.

If people — your customers — discover ways that Google+ is integral in the way they participate in the marketplace in which you serve them, I predict it will become a major focus of your marketing efforts.



We aren't geeks. And we haven't been geeks since 1991.

Hammock is a custom media and marketing services business known for award-winning design, editorial, video and digital media. We're also known for our branded process of research, strategy development and implementation -- a process designed to focus everything we do on helping our clients meet specific, measurable business objectives.

In other words, we're not a technology company.

But please, don't tell the Hammock Labs people we're not. The Hammock Labs folks seem to be everywhere -- both on-staff in the office and independent developers who work from places we've never heard of.

They spend all that time developing ways our clients can use new technology and new media to build rock-solid relationships with their customers. And we'll admit, the stuff they do is cool.

However, if they had their way, the geeks in Hammock Labs would want you to think we're a technology company. Unfortunately for them, they don't write the copy for the backs of their eBriefs.





What we do.



Hammock Analytics: Through a process we call Content Marketing Intelligence Reporting (CMIR), we offer a wide range of research services that provide the information necessary to develop and constantly monitor content marketing strategies our clients use to meet specific business objectives.



Hammock Studio: Our creative pros move projects from concept to finished product. Whether that's a magazine, eBook or e-mail newsletter, custom video, web app or wiki. We complement the resources of our clients with professionals who plan, design, write, edit, layout, shoot video, draw, illustrate, photograph and, well, you get the picture.



Hammock Labs: We work squarely at the intersection of content and the technology that enables it -- whether that's a wiki, web app, Wordpress blog, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Google+ or whatever the new thing is next week. Hammock Labs helps our team and our clients plan, develop, test and launch media for distribution online or via mobile devices -- or, yes, even in print.



Hammock Custom Media Management: We don't leave once we've recommended what a client should do. Our staff and network of seasoned media professionals serve as team partners with our clients, assuming outsourced responsibilities ranging from sales and marketing management to administration, circulation, fulfillment, production and distribution.

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