Whatever happened to Bebo and Friends Reunited?

by Sarah Jacob

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There are more people on Facebook today than there were on this planet just 200 years ago, and Mark Zuckerbergâ€™s phenomenally popular social networking site shows no sign of relinquishing its influence.

Along with Twitter, it enjoys a monopoly on the global social networking make up â€“ but it wasnâ€™t always that way.

Remember Bebo? Yes thatâ€™s right, if youâ€™re of a certain generation you probably had an account when you were about 13 complete with a garishly coloured profile and an information box declaring your love for Eminem.

How about Friends Reunited? The online school reunion site that for a period was big business here in Britain and a key issue in divorce proceedings across the land as lonely housewives reconnected with their school sweethearts.

But just what happened to these two giants of social networking to leave software developers out on the street and millions pledging their allegiance to Facebook? This is the story of Bebo and Friends Reunited.

Friends Reunited

Background â€“ Friends Reunited was launched in 2000 in a bid to help people get back in touch with old school friends. Although pitiful when compared to the amount of people using Facebook and Twitter today, within a year of its launch the site had 2.5 million members â€“ quite an achievement in the still relative early days of the Internet. Friends Reunited stories regularly filled newspapers and television shows and its popularity soon caught the attention of ITV, which later bought the site for Â£120 million.

Where it all went wrong â€“ Friends Reunited committed the cardinal sin of social networking â€“ it started to charge! Rather than depending solely on advertising, the site charged users Â£7.50 a year to contact their old school friends and this immediately put the majority of users off. As soon as free social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook came on the scene, Friends Reunited was finished and ITV cut its losses selling the site to DC Thompson for a measly Â£25 million.

Bebo

Background â€“ Beboâ€™s name stands for â€™Blog Early, Blog Oftenâ€™ and it was particularly popula British teenagers after its creation in the summer of 2005. The brainchild of Michael and Xochi Birch, Bebo boasted 45 million users in 2007 and eventually tempted AOL to part with a whopping $850 million (Â£540 million) for it in 2008.

Where it all went wrong â€“ Quite simply, other social networking sites did exactly the same as Bebo but better. MySpace came along and blew Bebo out of the water with similar features implemented to greater effect â€“ for example, Bebo had a music service just like its rivalâ€™s but MySpace attracted th bigger artists and record labels. Suddenly, more and more Bebo users were jumping ship to MySpace and the site was left trailing in other social networking sitesâ€™ wake (MySpaceâ€™s dominanc was short lived however, when Facebook came on the scene). AOL ended up selling Bebo for the embarrassingly low price of $10 million, netting a loss of $840 million (Â£533 million) in the process

and making them the laughing stock of the technology world.

IT job boards are filled with software architect, network analyst and iPhone developer vacancies for any number of social network sites and projects but as you can see, the road is often fraught with failure. Thereâ€™s no denying that social networking sites are more popular than ever, with Facebook and Twitter showing that more than one site can live side by side, but what does the future hold for social networking as a sector?

You would be stupid to suggest that Facebook and Twitter will go the same way Friends Reunited and Bebo have, but we will see when both companies are floated and sold whether Zuckerberg and co got out at the right time or will live to rue their decision.

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