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Facebook Is Done Giving Its Precious Social Graph To Competitors

Josh Constine 7:51 PM PST · January 24, 2013

Of all Facebook's data sets, it's the social graph that's truly unique. It's spent nine years getting you to confirm who you know, and apparently it's sick of handing over your friend list to competitors. This week it cut off both Twitter's new photo app Vine and messaging app Voxer from Find Friends, Facebook's API that lets you connect with Facebook friends on other apps. But this could backfire.

Facebook knows who you are, what you're interested in, where you go on the web, what apps you use, and more. However, other companies have bits and pieces of these data sets. LinkedIn knows your resume, Google knows your web searches, Twitter knows who you follow, Apple and Amazon have your credit card number, and your phone's OS maker knows what apps you've downloaded. Who your real-life friends are, though, is Facebook's domain.

Reconfirming your social graph manually on other apps is awkward at worst and annoying at best. Think about it. If your Facebook account were reset and you had to send friend requests to all your old friends, how many do you think would confirm?



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friend you when you met years ago probably wouldn't bother if they remember you.

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There's plenty of noise in Facebook's social graph. Some people blindly accept most requests they get, others send them to anyone they meet once, and all the connections grow stale over the years. Still, if you want to jumpstart a social app, Facebook's Find Friends feature is very valuable. It can be the difference between an empty feed and low retention, and a vibrant, addictive feed teeming with content from people you care about.

Facebook has offered Find Friends for years. But those were years when it was a web-based social network. It's more now, or at least it wants to be. Facebook hopes to host all the ways you communicate. That has pitted it against Apple, Google, and other companies in war for messaging that's only just heating up.

Data portability first became a big issue in 2010 when Facebook blocked Twitter from using its Find Friends feature. Later that year it got into a spat with Google about exporting contact lists. Google was pissed Facebook was sucking in Gmail contacts but not exporting friend lists. Facebook eventually began offering Download Your Data, which included your Friend List, but only in plain text.

More recently though, Twitter may have awoken the dragon when it cut off Instagram's access to Twitter's own version of "Find Friends." It was an

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understandable retaliation since Facebook had cut it off, and Twitter had wanted to buy Instagram, too.

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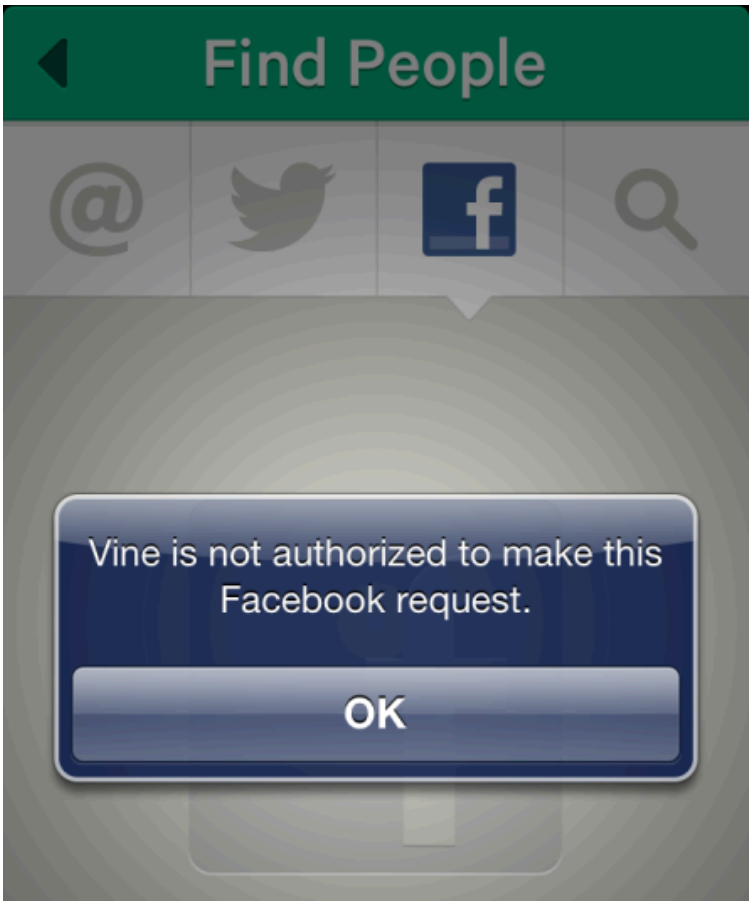
Now Facebook is coming out swinging, citing its Platform Policy that states "Competing social networks: (a) You may not use Facebook Platform to export user data into a competing social network without our permission."

Last week it blocked voice-messaging app Voxer's access to the social graph. At the time, Facebook told me this was because Voxer qualified as a competing messaging platform, but also because Voxer wasn't contributing much back to Facebook. Voxer only had a buried, and largely unnecessary, "share to Facebook" option. It got an email stating its Find Friends access would be revoked 48 hours later.

Then today Facebook shut off Find Friends for Twitter's Vine, as spotted by Jeff Martines and reported by The Verge. That makes both more and less sense. More because Twitter is a real competitor. It has decent scale and mindshare and competes for the same advertisers as Facebook. Twitter would love to know your Facebook social graph, which could help it refine its version, the "interest graph," which powers its ad targeting

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It makes less sense because Vine had a prominent “share to Facebook” option. What happened to Facebook only going after apps that don’t contribute much back? Apparently that got overruled because Twitter is a more legitimate threat. So much so that Facebook employed its policy that “we reserve the right to take action against your app even before the end of this 48 hour period.” It didn’t want Twitter getting any social graph data.



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Enforcement of these policies could create a moat around Facebook. It creates a barrier to engagement, retention, and growth for competing companies. It will force social apps to rely on other data sets, such as your phone’s contacts which may not have as complete of a social graph, though likely does include your closest friends whose numbers you have.

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That advantage may not be worth it, though. The enforcement means Facebook is not an "open platform." If companies are worried that Find Friends or other Facebook data access could be ripped away from them with little notice, it could cause a chilling effect on development on the Facebook platform. No one wants to build an app that relies on Facebook data if it could disappear.

Facebook reaffirmed this fear this morning when it enforced its ban on exporting data for use in social networks. Russian search engine Yandex's new social search mobile app Wonder got all of its API calls blocked just three hours after launch. That's a lot of programming and product work down the drain.

Facebook is playing with fire. It could use policy enforcement to cook competitors and shine a light on its dominance of social networking. But if this enforcement scares off developers whose apps might otherwise provide content that could be shown next to ads in the news feed and piped into Graph Search, Facebook could get burned badly.

[Image Credits: Newscom]

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Josh Constine
Venture Partner

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