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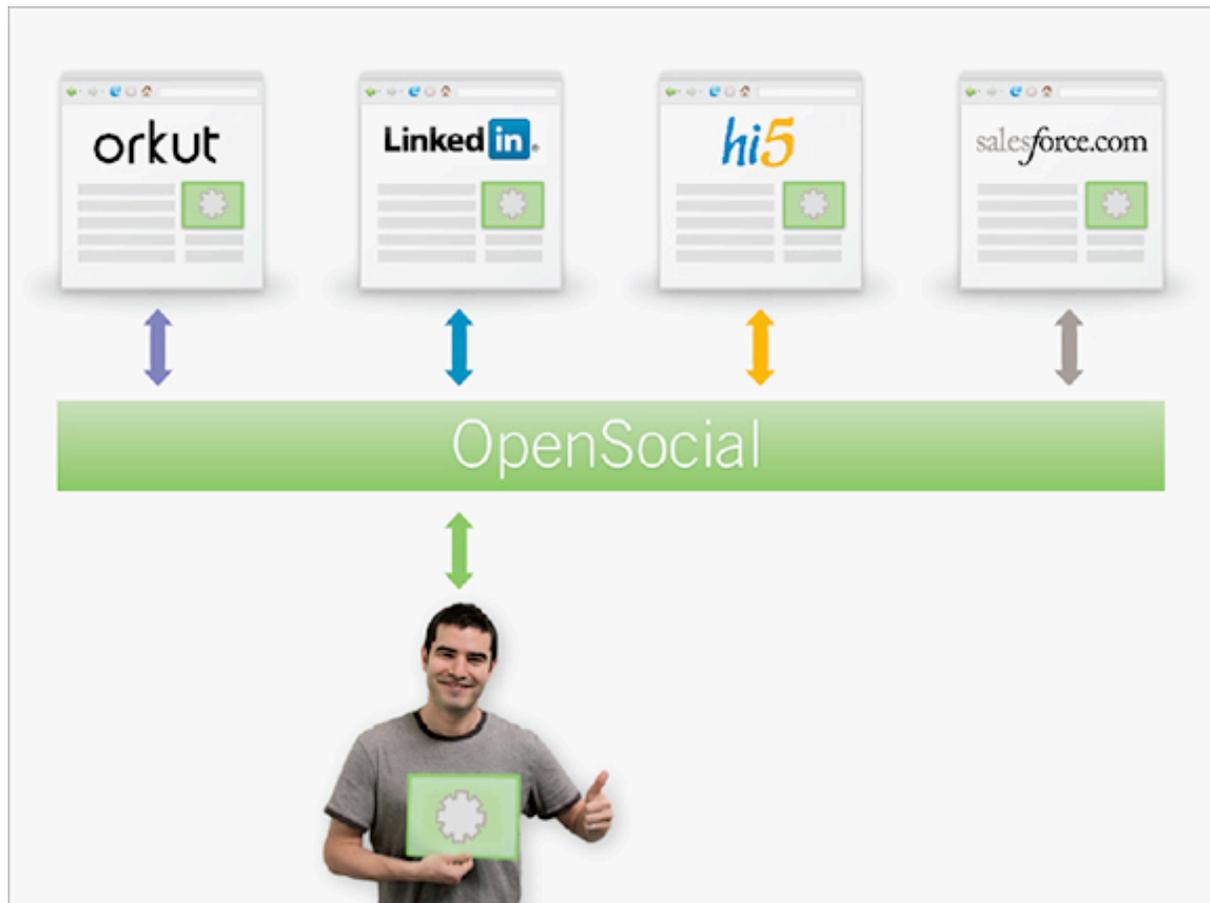
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Google Aims to Break Open the Closed World of Social Networking

By Dylan Tweney   Scott Gilbertson   Bryan Gardiner   Terrence Russell   11.01.07 | 1:00 PM

OpenSocial enables developers to learn a single set of API's and write applications that work in multiple places, minimizing work and maximizing distribution.
Image: Google

It's about time someone cracked the social networking nut.

Google is expected to announce a social networking platform later this week. Called OpenSocial, it will include tools to allow developers to create applications that utilize personal and social data contained in participating social networks. It is the first step toward putting you back in control of your online relationships.

"Facebook and MySpace are trying to build a proprietary web platform," says John McCrea, vice president of marketing at Plaxo, one of Google's partners in deploying OpenSocial. "Those of us that believe in openness saw that as a threat to the open web."

As Wired News complained earlier this year, social networks like MySpace and Facebook profit by keeping data about you and your friends locked up. And while it's possible to replicate much of the functionality of Facebook using open-

source tools, the critical missing component is the "social graph" -- the map of relationships between people that makes it possible for you to see when your friends add applications, photos or new connections to their profiles.

Google appears to be supplying that missing piece, with tools to allow developers access to the social graph and other personal data on participating networks.

While the announcement later this week will initially interest only developers, it's the first step towards building interoperable networks where users actually own their own data.

Slide CEO Max Levchin compares the Google API to the first wave of video games: techy and not very flashy, but a precursor of things to come.

"You look at something like Pong now and it compares poorly with what we have today, but at the time it was like a nuclear bomb in the gaming industry," Levchin says. "Right now you look at the applications on Facebook and there just isn't that much that's really sophisticated. There's years of development before we see something like Quake in social networks, but that's where this is going."

As first reported on TechCrunch, OpenSocial is a set of application programming interfaces (APIs) that will allow independent developers to build applications that run on any participating network, using the data stored by that network.

OpenSocial is designed to enable developers to access three specific pools of data: users' profile information, friends info (the social graph), and activities.

A Google spokesperson confirmed that the new API will be supported by a long list of second-tier players in the American social networking space: Hi5, Plaxo, LinkedIn, Orkut, Ning and Friendster. In addition, blogging platform vendor Six Apart confirmed to Wired News that it would be supporting OpenSocial.

Enterprise software vendors Salesforce and Oracle round out the list of potential platform supporters, while widget developers RockYou, Slide, iLike and Flixster have signed on to supply applications based on the platform.

The participating networks have far fewer users in the United States than their leading competitors. According to ComScore, MySpace has 68 million monthly U.S. users, Facebook boasts 30 million and the OpenSocial networks together have just 22 million monthly U.S. users.

However, they are aiming at different markets. The participation of LinkedIn, Salesforce and Oracle suggests that the fruits of OpenSocial may include a crop of business-oriented social networking applications, far different from the fun-and-games orientation of most Facebook and MySpace apps.

"The killer app for OpenSocial will be somebody making a really good spreadsheet component," says Anil Dash, chief evangelist for Six Apart. "There's no way a company wants to host an application like that on Facebook, especially in the world of [regulatory laws] HIPAA and Sarbanes-Oxley. It would just be asinine."

LinkedIn senior director of products Adam Nash says his company's users will probably see the impact of the new partnership with Google sometime in early 2008, although it won't necessarily be about connecting with other social networks, as some have suggested. "What you'll see in the end is great third party developers making even more business apps for us very soon," he said.

In fact, the company is going to demo one such app called the Conference Calendar at a Google event this week. According to Nash, the new app will automatically know what industry you work in (based on your LinkedIn profile) and subsequently spit out a series of relevant upcoming conferences based on this info.

Adam Gross, vice president of development and marketing at Salesforce, also says he expects OpenSocial will do wonders for his company's ability to provide its customers with even more useful data.

"This continues a trend of using consumer technologies to make business technologies better," Gross says. "From my point of view, OpenSocial is really about the widget economy we've seen in a short amount of time build up around

social networking," he added. "OpenSocial is energizing that economy now as developers work can be translated to different contexts and platforms."

In that sense, Google's open APIs will "pour even more fuel on a rapidly burning fire."

There are hurdles. One is building sufficient momentum when the two biggest social networking sites are not represented.

Another is complexity, says Socializr CEO and Friendster founder Jonathan Abrams. "Previous efforts like FOAF [friend of a friend] and OpenID were pretty complicated. For something to be useful from the user's perspective it has to be simple and easy," says Abrams.

Regardless, Google's move is a big bet on interoperability -- and against the "winner take all" philosophy of social networking, according to Six Apart's Dash.

"The market has already decided that there's going to be a long tail of social networks, and that people are going to belong to more than one. As soon as you belong to more than one, this kind of interoperability is critical," Dash says. "Open standards win every time."