



Gay web surfers seeking personal or commercial connections fuel a new surge of gay online networking

## My GaySpace

Networking sites for gay men and lesbians broaden the appeal of the MySpace zeitgeist

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It starts with a click.

Within about 15 minutes, enough time to upload a picture and hammer out a few lines of introduction, just about anyone can find instant acceptance into a social group that boasts more than 150 million members.

It's called MySpace, an electronic collective of people with on-line profiles, and it's damn near taken over the Internet.

That gay web surfers would jump onboard MySpace — and a crop of new all-gay MySpace competitors would pop up — should come as no surprise. During the Internet explosion, gay men and lesbians — in the middle of their own cultural explosion — fled isolation and alienation for the fast information and easy connectivity of the net's chat rooms and message boards.

Two sites, OurChart and GLEE (Gay, Lesbian, and Everyone Else) are emerging from the ranks of gay networking sites.

Both GLEE and OurChart stick closely to the MySpace formula. Users construct an online profile, and start the process by adding friends. But, according to their creators, the similarities between GLEE and Ourchart and MySpace largely end there.

GLEE.com launched in February 2007 and has amassed about 30,000 members since that time, according to site manager Parker Ray.

As its name suggests, GLEE is open to everyone, but users find a much different environment for networking on the site, Ray says.

"It's kind of the reverse of the general social networking sites, which are straight-centric because heterosexuals make up the majority of the overall population," Ray says. "We wanted to switch that up on GLEE."

GLEE got its start when site creators opined that sites like Gay.com essentially offer users hook-ups, when gay web surfers are actually seeking out connections on a variety of levels, Ray says.

"It wasn't that difficult to look at the gay site landscape to figure out what was not there was a forum for meaningful connections for people who have shared interests over and above hooking up," he says.

GLEE users can collect friends indiscriminately if they choose, but Ray says that they usually seek an optimum experience with the site by seeking out contacts with whom they have a shared interest.

"The trend is starting to return to the niche," he says. "People are looking for the two or three sites that fit them best. If I'm a black, gay filmmaker, I might join a site for gay people, for black people, and for filmmakers. And that's it."

The most important element that connects "99.9 percent" of the members on OurChart, a site inspired by the characters on Showtime's "The L Word," is being a lesbian.

"There hadn't been a specific social networking site for lesbians heretofore," says Hilary Rosen, OurChart site editor. "Obviously, there are lesbians on MySpace, and there are lesbians on Facebook. I hope to steal all their business."

The "Chart" is a throwback to a chart created by a character on "The L Word" to keep tabs on the hookups between characters.

Rosen says that as OurChart grows from a marketing arm of "The L Word" into an organic network of friends, hook-ups happen, but they don't take center stage.

"On the show, it does represent the hook-ups, but so far on our site, it represents networks of friends," she says.

GLEE is making progress, but according to Ray, OurChart, which Rosen estimates has 300,000 members, is clearly the leader of the pack among gay social networking sites.

OurChart, like "The L Word," is owned by CBS, and generates revenues through advertising. As OurChart heads into its second year, it continues to distinguish itself from the show by offering original content, including an episodic web series. Officials also plan to sell advertisers the specific, niche audience the site rakes in.

"This is a very interesting market for advertisers, and I think in some respects we may be one of the first to create it," Rosen says, citing a perceived higher income and education level among lesbians that makes them especially attractive to advertisers.

"We think we have a segment of super consumers here," Rosen says.

Neither OurChart, nor GLEE, which also generates revenue through advertising sales, offers premium or subscription services to members, who can join and maintain their presence on the sites free of charge.

Fab Femme, a networking site for all women but primarily lesbians, differs from OurChart because Fab Femme places an added emphasis on career and business connections for “an under-served niche — sophisticated, professional women who are looking to get the most out of their social lives and careers,” explains site founder Susan Lubeck, a San Francisco based event planner.

Like GLEE, Fab Femme separates itself from MySpace by emphasizing deeper connections within its network.

“Our hope is that women will use it to energize and expand their social and professional lives on a daily, ongoing, and meaningful basis,” Lubeck says.

Where Fab Femme and OurChart grab female connections, GLEE marketers are concerning themselves with bridging e-gaps between gay men and lesbians.

Ray says that taking the onus off romance makes that task easier.

“There’s been a lot of discussion that gay men and lesbians can’t get along online,” he says. “That’s because the major sites have been focused on hook-ups and dating — and of course gays and lesbians aren’t going to get along in that context.”

The other ace-in-the-hole Ray, Rosen and Lubeck are counting on is what’s been dubbed MyMalaise, the cynicism some MySpace users develop after months of collecting “friends” they never knew before, and, likely, will never come to know.

“People still maintain their MySpace pages, but I’ve seen a level of frustration from there just being too much on MySpace,” Ray says. “I compare it to being stuck in Times Square on New Year’s Eve.”