

# Social Networking for Telcos

## Assessing the Telco Opportunity in Social Networking

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# Contents

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<b>1</b>	<b>Abstract</b>	<b>2</b>
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<b>2</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
	– Social Networking Overview	3
	– Impact of Social Networking on the Web	3

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<b>3</b>	<b>Current Telco Initiatives in Social Networking</b>	<b>5</b>
	– Partnerships	5
	– Aggregation	5
	– Aquisitions	6
	– In-House Development	6

---

<b>4</b>	<b>Opportunity for Telcos in Social Networking</b>	<b>7</b>
	– Incremental Revenues through Multiple Monetization Models	8
	– Low Investment Risks	8

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<b>5</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>10</b>
	– How to Enter	10
	– How to Launch and Drive Uptake	11
	– How to Monetize	12

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# 1 Abstract

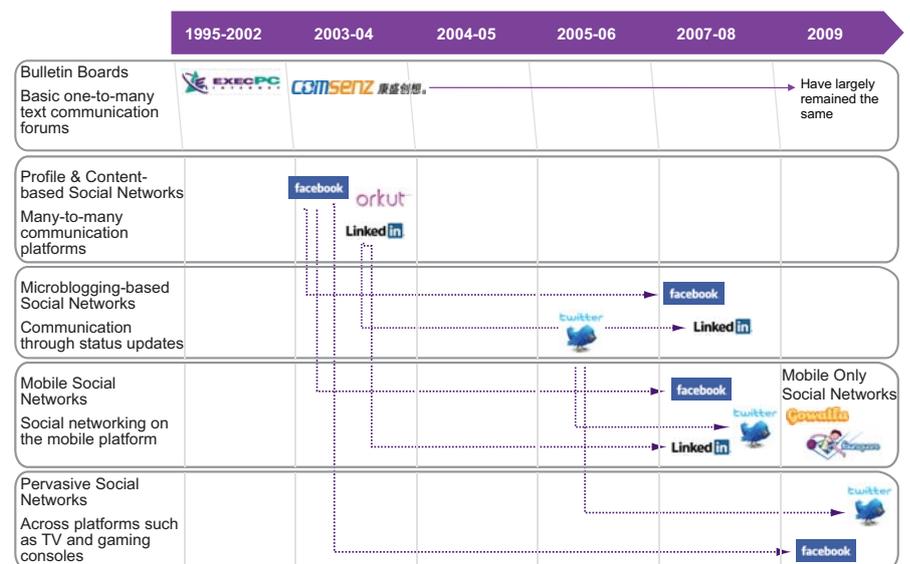
In recent years there has been a sharp rise in consumer interest and time spent on social networks, driven by increasing consumer desire for multi-way communication and collaboration. Several telcos have ventured into social networking, however, their activity so far has been largely limited to partnerships with established online players in order to offer customized mobile versions. Operator challenges around venturing into social networking include competition from established social networks and coping with volatile consumer behavior. On the other hand, benefits such as new revenue streams, increased data traffic and low capital investments make a foray into social networking a worthwhile proposition. Our analysis indicates that online social networking is not attractive, given the large network-agnostic subscriber base and global reach of market leaders. The nascent mobile social networking space where operators can leverage their existing strengths such as address book information, location capabilities, and brand recall presents the real opportunity for telcos. We recommend that telcos do not delay their entry into mobile social networking and quickly launch aggregation services. This should be followed by incrementally adding capabilities such as enhanced address book applications, geo-location based services and a gradual shift towards pervasive social applications. Telcos should decide on the ideal combination of revenue models—such as local advertising, micropayments, advertisements, and subscription—based on the type of social network they decide to launch.

## 2 Introduction

### Social Networking Overview

Social networking is one of the most rapidly evolving services on the Web. Online bulletin boards of the mid 1990s have given way to interactive platform agnostic social services (see Figure 1). Over the last five years, social networking has witnessed several innovations with most services regularly updating their core offerings through new features and functionality.

**Figure 1: Evolution of Social Network Service Offerings**



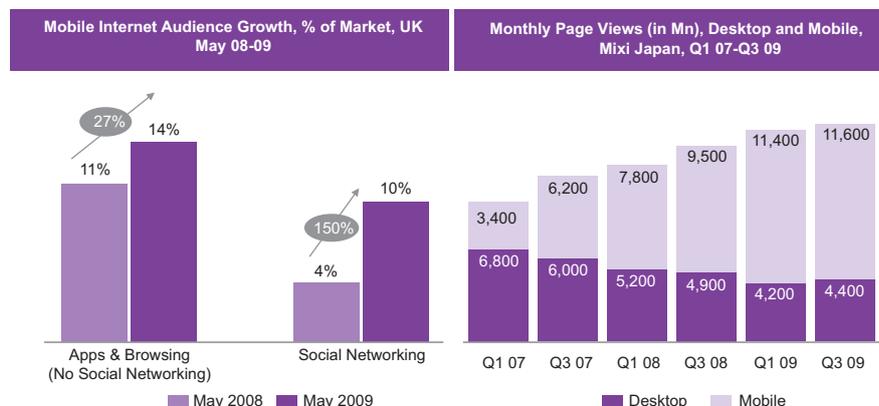
Source: Capgemini TME Strategy Lab Analysis; Tech Radar, *So where's China in the world of social networking Sites* – Facebook, MySpace, January 2008. Note: Mobile social network has been considered when a network has launched a dedicated mobile application; Comsenz is an enabler of bulletin board (BB) services in China, where there are over three billion registered BB users

Social networking is emerging as an important cross-platform service across the PC, mobile and TV. As a result of increasing consumer desire to access their social networks on the go, their usage on the mobile platform has gone up significantly (see Figure 2). Many social networks have also started offering their services on other emerging platforms. For instance, while Facebook offers integration with Microsoft's gaming console Xbox LIVE, a Twitter widget is available to subscribers on Verizon's FiOS TV.

### Impact of Social Networking on the Web

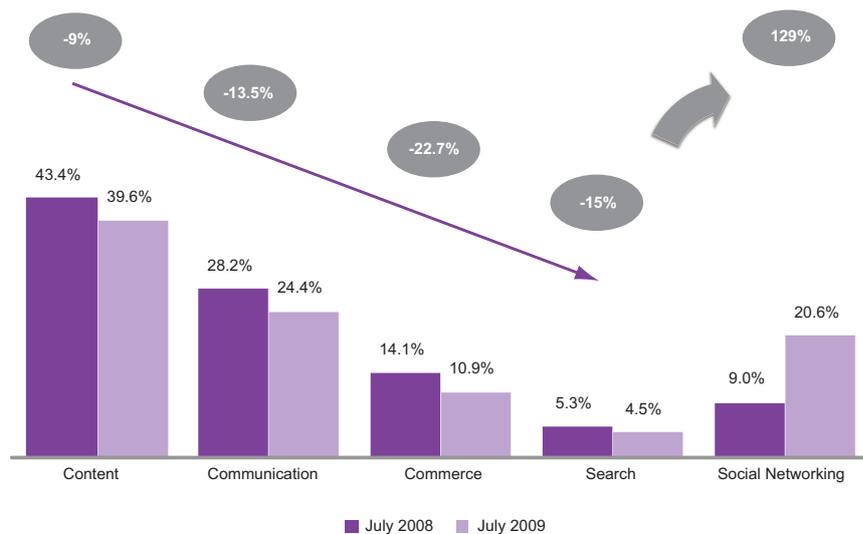
Social networks are gradually transforming the Web landscape with more and more websites integrating social functionalities. The decline in time spent by users on other Internet activities can potentially be attributed to the sharp rise in user engagement on social networks (see Figure 3).

**Figure 2: Increased Usage of Social Networking on the Mobile Platform**



Source: Company websites; Comscore, *Social Networks on the Move*, September 2009; Morgan Stanley, *The Mobile Internet Report*, December 2009  
 Note: 1) Percentage of total market refers to the number of mobile users using mobile Internet services during the three month periods ending May 2008 and May 2009. 2) Mixi is one of the most popular social networks in Japan, available on both the fixed and mobile platform

**Figure 3: Share of Time Spent on Internet Activities, %, July 2008 - July 2009, US**



Source: Capgemini TME Strategy Lab Analysis; OPA Internet Activity Index

This increasing time spent on social networks is resulting in these portals emerging as gateways to other content on the Web. In December 2009, 15% of traffic to major Web portals like Yahoo, MSN and AOL came from Facebook and MySpace<sup>1</sup>.

As social networks move towards becoming the most popular communication and content platforms on the web, both fixed and mobile, they hold the potential of disrupting current communication and content providers. Telcos should thus firm up strategies on how to mitigate any likelihood of disruption to their core services. In this paper, we qualify the social networking opportunity for telcos and propose some recommendations around how telcos can tap this market.

<sup>1</sup> San Francisco Chronicle, *Facebook directs more online users than Google*, February 15, 2010.

# 3 Current Telco Initiatives in Social Networking

The popularity of social networking has prompted telcos to foray into this space (see Figure 4). Telecom players have mainly entered this space through partnerships, although some have chosen to acquire or build their own social networks. This section presents an overview of key telco social networking initiatives.

**Figure 4: Summary of Telco Initiatives in Social Networking**

	Partnership	Acquisition	In-House Development
2006-2007		<p>Acquisition of popular existing social network</p>	<p>Content-based social network for sharing pictures</p>
2008-2009	<p>Partnerships to drive data traffic</p>	<p>Acquisition for technology</p>	<p>General fixed + mobile social network</p> <p>Virgin Mobile Connect</p>

Source: Company websites and press releases

## Partnerships

Most telco activity has been limited to partnerships with established social networks to offer customized mobile versions of their services on the operator's network. Such a model provides operators an easy entry route and the potential to benefit from the popularity and user base of existing networks through increased mobile Internet, SMS, and MMS usage. For instance, more than 200 operators in 60 countries have partnered with Facebook to promote mobile products<sup>2</sup>.

Some operators have also partnered with device manufacturers to offer social networking focused handsets. For example, 3 has partnered with handset vendor INQ on a range of social phones available exclusively to its subscribers. Such partnerships are aimed at differentiating the operator's offering and driving uptake of social networking on the mobile platform.

## Aggregation

Many telcos have also launched aggregation services such as Orange Social Life, Virgin Mobile Connect, and Vodafone 360 that pull content from multiple social networks into one application. These services typically integrate address book, social networking, email, and instant messaging (IM) contacts of users in a single

<sup>2</sup> Facebook Press Room Statistics.

contact list and allow subscribers to manage multiple social profiles from one location. Such applications provide telcos with an easy opportunity to leverage the popularity of existing social networks by offering their subscribers an aggregated user experience.

In fact, the launch of aggregation services has been the next step after partnerships with existing social networks adopted by most telcos in their foray into social networking.

### **Acquisitions**

Some telcos have acquired social networking companies, either to leverage technology capabilities or to gain user-base. In 2007, South Korean operator SK Telecom acquired a leading regional social network, Cyworld, which had around three million subscribers at the time of acquisition, as part of its strategy to bolster its online portal Nate. Driven by the popularity of Cyworld, Nate overtook market leader Daum as South Korea's most visited Internet portal within a year of the acquisition<sup>3</sup>. Another example is Vodafone, which acquired Zyb in 2008 in order to gain technical competency required to launch an enhanced address book service. Vodafone has since used Zyb's technology and redeployed it in the form of its mobile social networking offering, Vodafone 360<sup>4</sup>.

However, acquisitions have not been a very popular entry strategy for telcos so far mainly because of lack of attractive acquisition targets in this space and fluctuating valuations. For instance, Facebook's estimated valuations have varied from US\$750 million to US\$15 billion. Furthermore, most major social networks have not positioned themselves for sale and are either planning an Initial Public Offering (IPO) or are owned by large conglomerates which are reluctant to exit.

### **In-House Development**

As exceptional cases, operators such as Orange and Telefónica have experimented with launching their own social networks, however, these initiatives continue to be in early stages of uptake. Orange Labs' initiative, Pikeo, a photo sharing service, which was launched in 2006, continues to be in public beta phase and has not been commercially launched in France Telecom's home market. Similarly, Telefónica's social networking offering, Keteke, which was launched both for PC and mobile platforms, is still in public beta since 2008.

The long gestation periods for operator-developed online social networks indicate that these initiatives have not taken off as expected in the face of high competition from established players.

<sup>3</sup> Asia Pulse, *K COMM Overtakes Daum as Korea's Most-visited Internet Portal*, June 2004.

<sup>4</sup> TechCrunch, *Danish Mobile Social Network ZYB Acquired By Vodafone For €315-million*, May 2008.

# 4 Opportunity for Telcos in Social Networking

Telcos need to carefully evaluate the most attractive opportunities in social networking before making a leap. The PC-based online social networking space is dominated both by large global players—such as Facebook and MySpace—and regional giants like China’s Qzone and South Korea’s Cyworld. Telcos are likely to find it difficult to compete with these established social networks, considering online players’ large network-agnostic subscriber base and wide reach on the fixed platform.

**Figure 5: Social Networking Platforms Differentiated by their Opportunity for Telcos**



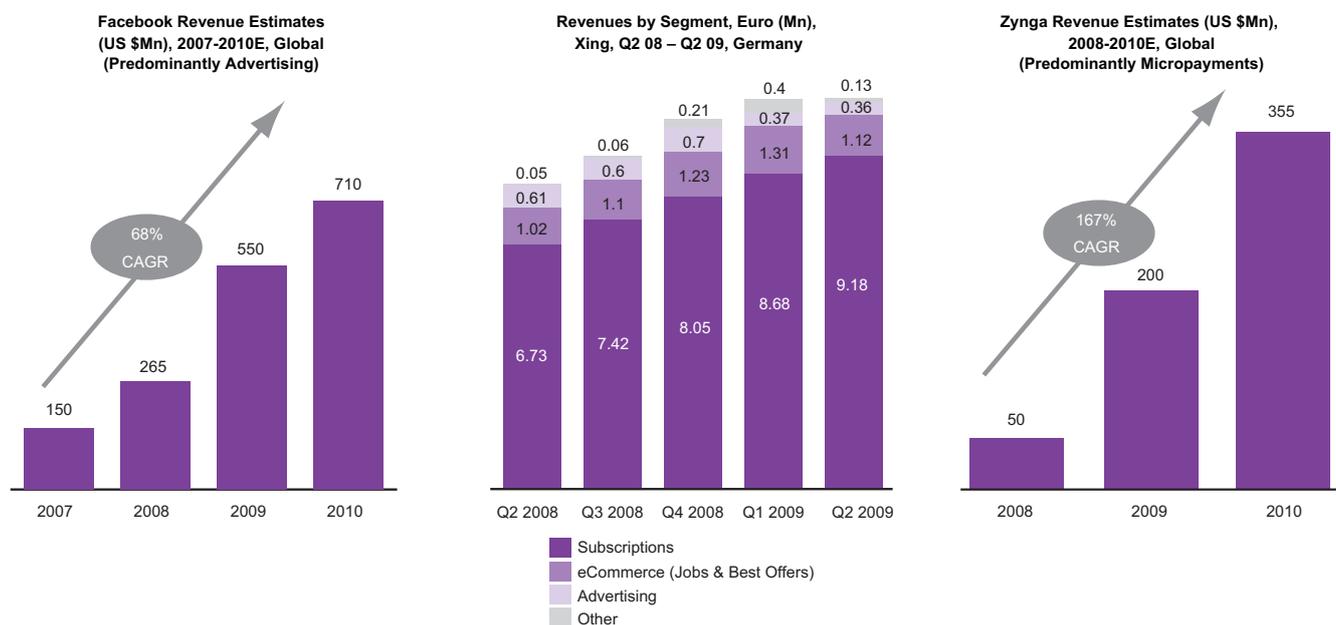
Source: Company websites and press releases; Informa, *Mobile Social Networking Forecasts, 2009*; Piper Jaffray, *Pay to Play: Paid Internet Services*, July 2009

## The mobile social networking space offers telcos an attractive opportunity

The mobile platform, however, offers telcos an attractive opportunity (see Figure 5) to enter the social networking space considering the nascent state of mobile-only social networks, their rising attractiveness, and certain key telco assets which can be leveraged to make the foray successful.

Most successful mobile-only social networks have been launched as recently as 2009 and this space is witnessing a lot of innovation and user traction. Foursquare, a mobile geo-location based social network, which was launched in March 2009, is currently seeing a check-in every second<sup>5</sup>. We believe telcos should tap this opportunity by leveraging their assets such as billing systems, address book information, and location information. For instance, telcos can customize existing billing solutions to enable transactions on mobile social networking services. Similarly, address book information could be integrated with IM, email, and social profiles to offer enhanced address book services. Location information of users can be used to develop geo-location services.

<sup>5</sup> Tech Crunch, *Foursquare Who? Gowalla What? MyTown Has 500,000 Users And 31 Million Check-Ins*, January 2010.

**Figure 6: Growth Indicators of Different Monetization Models in the Social Networking Space that Telcos Can Potentially Deploy**

Source: Capgemini TME Strategy Lab Analysis; company websites and annual reports; Piper Jaffray, *Pay to Play: Paid Internet Services*, July 2009; Inside Social Games, *The Latest Stats on Zynga: New Traffic, Revenue and a \$1 Billion Valuation?*, November 2009; Virtual Goods News, *\$50 Mil Revenue from Virtual Goods Sales for Zynga in 2008*, January 2009  
 Note: 1) Zynga is one of the leading social gaming companies, operating popular games including Farmville, Mafia Wars, on Facebook. 2) Xing is one of the popular business-user oriented social networks operating primarily in Germany

## Users on the mobile platform are 2.5 times more likely to pay for services than those on the fixed platform

Telcos should thus launch mobile social networks and benefit from incremental revenue streams, increased data traffic, multiple monetization schemes, and low investment risks which make this proposition all the more attractive. We detail these benefits in the subsequent sub-sections.

### Incremental Revenues Through Multiple Monetization Models

The rapidly evolving social networking space presents telcos with a real opportunity to boost revenues from non-core services. The success of advertising, which is the mainstay of revenues on most social networks, coupled with the emergence and early successes of new monetization models such as micropayments and subscriptions makes social networking all the more attractive for telcos (see Figure 6).

The willingness of users to spend money on social networks is another healthy sign which presents potential incremental revenue streams for telcos. In 2009, it is expected that 33% of the total social networking revenue in US came from paid services such as membership fees, premium features, and virtual goods<sup>6</sup>. Most interestingly, research indicates that users on the mobile platform are 2.5 times more likely to pay for web-based services than those on the fixed platform<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, even from a monetization standpoint, venturing into the mobile social networking space is much more lucrative for telcos.

### Low Investment Risks

The low level of investment required to launch a social network which can potentially yield telcos high benefits in terms of incremental revenues, increased stickiness, and high data traffic makes the proposition extremely attractive. In December 2009, a leading social network, Friendster, which had nearly 50 million

<sup>6</sup> eMarketer, *Worldwide Social Network Ad Spending*, March 2009; Piper Jaffray, *Pay to Play: Paid Internet Services*, July 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Morgan Stanley, *Mobile Internet Report*, December 2009.

## **Maintaining sustained market leadership in social networking will be difficult in the face of changing consumer preferences**

users was sold for an estimated €29 million<sup>8</sup>. Launching mobile social networks typically costs even less. For instance, Gowalla, a leading mobile geo-location based social network, which had close to 100,000 users within three months of launch, required just US\$2 million for initial funding<sup>9</sup>. Such moderate levels of investments compared with capital-intensive telecom initiatives make social networking a low capital risk proposition for telcos.

Telcos' entry into social networking, though, will be accompanied with a set of challenges such as the dynamic nature of the space and volatile consumer behavior. Maintaining sustained market leadership will thus be difficult in the face of changing consumer preferences. Moreover, demographic variations and regional peculiarities will make target audience identification a significant challenge. For instance, there was a 1% fall between December 2007 and December 2008<sup>10</sup> in unique audience composition of member community<sup>11</sup> sites amongst the 18-34 year olds. In contrast, UK social networking subscribers in the 15-24 year age segment grew at 14% between June 2008 and June 2009<sup>12</sup>.

However, despite these challenges, social networks remain attractive and have garnered a substantial user base with steady revenue growth. As the Web becomes more social, telcos are well positioned to lead this transition by virtue of their hold on client address books, a user's closest set of contacts. Most of all, the nascent state of mobile web provides an opportunity for telcos to define new paradigms in consumer behavior and monetization models and not be burdened by the history of the desktop web. Considering these factors, a foray in mobile social networking seems an attractive opportunity for telcos.

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<sup>8</sup> TechCrunch, *Friendster Valued At Just \$26.4 million In Sale*, December 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Venture Beat, *How Gowalla landed \$8.4 million for location-based game*, December 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Nielsen, *Global Faces and Networked Places*, March 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Note: Member Community implies Social Networking and Blogging websites.

<sup>12</sup> Comscore, *15-24 Year Olds in the U.K. Encroach on their Elder's Social Networking Space*, August 2009.

# 5 Recommendations

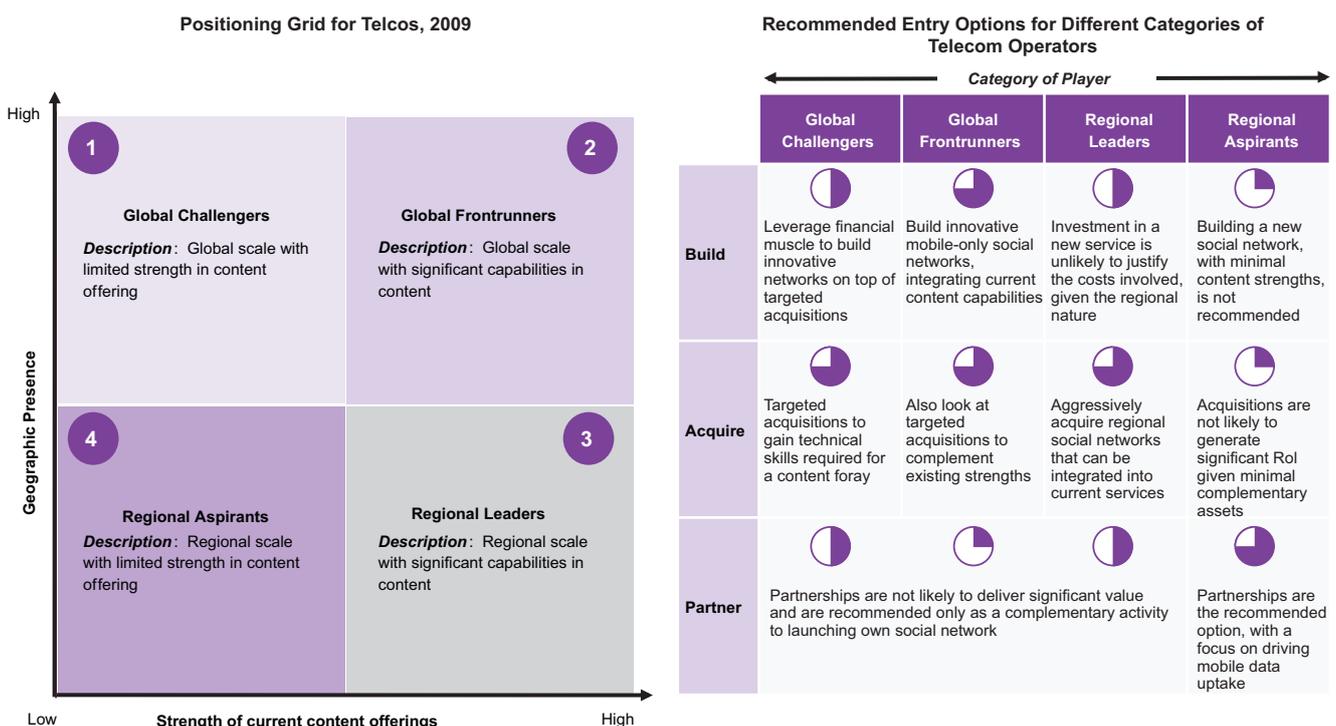
## Operator entry into mobile social networks needs to be closely tied to their scale of operations and strength of existing content offerings

In this section, we propose some recommendations around how telcos can successfully launch, operate and monetize their mobile social networking proposition.

### How to Enter

A one-size-fits-all strategy will not work for a telco entry into social networking. Instead, operator entry into mobile social networks needs to be closely tied to their scale of operations and strength of existing content offerings. Scale of operations for an operator includes parameters such as subscriber base, geographic reach, brand strength, and financial resources, which will all be critical in determining its social networking entry route. Similarly, operators' existing content capabilities which include mobile content experience, existing content partnerships, and application development skills, will help create a platform for successful offerings. For instance, micropayment-based transactions on social networks are inherently similar to content sales on operator mobile portals in terms of immediacy of transaction and small amounts involved. Similarly, existing partnerships with content companies will play a key role in building a mobile social network.

Figure 7: Scale and Capabilities in Mobile Content Play a Significant Role in Determining Success of Operator Initiatives in Social Networking



Source: Capgemini TME Strategy Lab Analysis

**Gowalla, a mobile geo-location based social network, required just US\$2 million as initial funding**

From a social network entry perspective, telcos can be positioned in four categories based on their scale and capabilities in mobile content: Global Challengers, Global Frontrunners, Regional Leaders, and Regional Aspirants (see Figure 7). Telcos should formulate their entry strategy in the mobile social networking space based on their position on the grid.

Global challengers and frontrunners should primarily enter through their own social networks. While global challengers should leverage their financial strength to acquire social networking players for technology, global frontrunners should build on their strong content capabilities to develop offerings in-house. Regional leaders and aspirants should mainly consider partnerships and selective acquisitions to step in. Regional leaders should focus on acquiring regional networks, with considerable traction in local markets, and enhance them further by leveraging their content strength. Regional aspirants on the other hand should partner with existing social networks or application developers to create value-added offerings because they have minimal content strengths and scale to either build or acquire.

**How to Launch and Drive Uptake**

Telcos should adopt a chronological launch strategy to quickly make an entry into mobile social networking (see Figure 8). Operators should initially offer simple applications and incrementally add enhanced features. Since the space is nascent and telcos have limited prior experience, it is imperative that their first step is successful and creates brand awareness. Telcos should thus step in quickly by offering a simple and addictive mobile social networking experience to garner a large subscriber base and learn in the process. They should follow up by integrating additional functionalities such as enhanced address books, location-based social features, and cross-platform access. This approach will help telcos best leverage their strengths and establish a slow but steady footing in this space.

**Figure 8: Chronological Launch Approach for Telcos in the Mobile Social Networking Space**

	1 Social Network Aggregation Services	2 Enhanced Address Book Applications	3 Geo-location Based Services	4 Pervasive Social Applications
<b>Description</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Services which enable users to access multiple social networks on mobile phones through single sign-on</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Applications that integrated social networking contacts, IM buddy lists and email addresses with a user's contact list</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Services which leverage a user's physical location to provide enhanced context aware services and experiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Applications which extend the reach of social networks across platforms such as TV, gaming consoles, etc.</li> </ul>
<b>Rationale of Positioning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Easy to develop, hence the quickest entry route</li> <li>Strong acceptance in market as they offer users ubiquitous access to their online social profiles on the go</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Integration of social information with the address book is the next logical enhancement</li> <li>Offers significant value-add to subscribers by making contacts as the center of communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Once capabilities are developed, the next step involves adding location and context to applications</li> <li>Telcos are best equipped to offer such services as they can bypass GPS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Future of mobile social networking lies in cross platform ubiquitous access of social information</li> <li>Telcos will need to extend their social offerings across devices</li> </ul>
<b>Indicative Examples</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social Life (Orange)</li> <li>Connect (Virgin Mobile)</li> <li>SocialNet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vodafone 360</li> <li>MyCommunity (T-Mobile)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Foursquare</li> <li>Gowalla</li> <li>Loopt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facebook on Xbox LIVE</li> <li>Twitter widgets on Verizon FiOS</li> </ul>

Source: Capgemini TME Strategy Lab Analysis

It is also important for telcos to adopt multiple promotion strategies such as partnerships, push marketing, and an open approach in order to drive uptake of their social networking proposition. Operators can partner with device vendors to offer pre-bundled applications thereby creating a wider ecosystem for their social network. Furthermore, partnerships with innovative developers such as gaming companies will encourage users to sign up through viral applications built on top

of the operator's social network. Pushing their service to subscribers by integrating it into various traditional telco mediums such as MMS and SMS, mobile portals, etc., is another marketing strategy which can yield operators rich dividends. This approach will help translate the operators' existing subscriber base onto their social network. Most importantly, in order to attract users from competing networks to sign up to encourage creation of network effects, telcos should not limit their service to users of their own network.

**How to Monetize**

A successful monetization strategy for their mobile social networking offering will be of foremost concern to telcos delving into this space. Operators will need to select the right monetization scheme based on the kind of social network they decide to launch (see Figure 9). So while local advertising will work best for telcos launching geo-location based mobile social networks, subscriptions will be the way to go for niche networks targeted at specific user groups. Though the primary business model of a telco should depend on the type of social network, ideally, a combination of multiple business models will be most suited for greater gains.

**Figure 9: Different Monetization Models which Telcos can Adopt for their Mobile Social Networks**

		Monetization Models			
		Local Advertising	Micropayments	Display and Search Advertising	Subscription
Works Best For?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Telcos launching location-based social networks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Telcos launching social gaming applications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Telcos launching general purpose social networks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Telcos launching niche social networks targeted at specific users</li> </ul>	
Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most features revolve around a user's location and context</li> <li>Collaboration with local vendors for promotions offers significant revenue upside</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compelling social games stimulate users to spend on virtual goods</li> <li>Asian geographies stand testimony to the success of micropayment model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Telcos have large existing subscriber base, which if translated into users of their social networking proposition hold potential for generating revenues from display and search adverts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Users with specific interests are more willing to pay</li> <li>In the online world too, most niche networks have successfully adopted the subscription model</li> </ul>	

Source: Capgemini TME Strategy Lab Analysis

Pricing is another area where telcos can bring in innovation. Data plans from most operators are still expensive and not very attractive for accessing social networks on the mobile platform. Introduction of attractive flat rate plans and targeted pricing can be a key differentiator for operators.

In conclusion, mobile social networking presents telcos with a real opportunity to tap into their latent assets and establish a firm footing in this nascent yet highly attractive space. It is imperative for telcos to leverage the early mover advantage and quickly enter mobile social networking by offering simple yet compelling applications. Operators can then incrementally enhance their applications to offer greater value add to their subscribers. In order to drive growth and generate significant user traction, telcos would need to adopt an open approach and not tie in subscribers to their own network. Finally, to gain maximum revenue, operators would need to adopt a combination of monetization schemes based on the type of mobile social network they decide to launch.

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