

Blowing out the walls

By  Gil Sperling

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Facebook's ambitions have set the company on a course to radically shift its standing from social media giant to futuristic innovation hub.



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F8 is Facebook's annual developer conference. The company lays out its road map, developments, and vision for the future. While some new products demoed at the conference added little more than fun to the social media experience, others made it clear that the walls of the social media box in which Facebook has been neatly packaged have been blown clean off.



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At F8, developers were given insight into progress made in the virtual and augmented reality (VR and AR) realms – stunts like augmented masks and special effects overlays, all the way through to Facebook Spaces – a VR app that will, within the foreseeable future bring true VR into the mainstream.

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Yet, while impressive, these developments have been predictable based on current tech trajectories.

It's the telepathy that has me buzzing...

Freaky

I make a bi-annual pilgrimage to FB HQ – certainly a highlight of my job, but one that has often times left me with the feeling that I departed the dinner table before dessert was served. The doors to the mystical Building 8 were always tightly barred. F8 2017 finally revealed the R&D that was taking place inside. And it didn't disappoint.

As AR and VR interaction slides from sci-fi to the suburban sofa, the mechanics of social interaction need an overhaul – and the mechanism that we have relied upon to date has been the Qwerty keyboard. Building 8 revealed “The Brain Click” and “Reverse Braille” – developments that will allow humans to interface directly with technology. So, you will be able to type out 100 words per minute by *thinking* them. Further research is pushing the company towards a system that will manipulate nerve endings in the skin to send and receive messages. Facebook's going to read your mind. No brain implants, just wearable tech that doubles as an AR platform.

The company announced an ethics committee to help it navigate these uncharted waters, and Zuckerberg stressed the tech was still in its infancy: “Technology is going to have to get a lot more advanced before we can share a pure thought or feeling, but this is a first step.”

Speaking of ethics...

One of the hottest topics on the ethical philosophy circuit is artificial intelligence (AI). Even the Doomsday Clock, now just 30 seconds away from the closest it has ever been to Armageddon since 1953 (at a somewhat hot period in the Cold War), cites AI as a contributing factor to the creep towards the end of days.

Doom and gloom aside, the AI coming out of Facebook is fundamentally changing the rules of engagement when it comes to customer interaction. And, as Facebook battles its competitors for users' time, it's investing heavily on AI to improve the user experience.

In 2016, Facebook introduced “bots” for Messenger – AI-powered customer-interfacing robots. Unlike his counterparts nudging the minute hand towards midnight on the Doomsday clock, Zuckerberg is quoted as saying that his belief is that AI can save lives. He's probably right, but in reality, Facebook wants to keep eyes on its content, without people straying out of the app for anything. More time spent in the app means more advertising spend. And, Facebook's R&D to keep users engaged is an opportunity that marketers can take full advantage of.

Facebook Messenger boasts, according to David Marcus, Facebook vice president of messaging products, 1.2 billion monthly users. Additionally, in roughly the year since launch, there are 100,000 active bots on the platform.

Keeping their eye on the ball

Facebook knows well that for something to work, end-user uptake is the most defining factor. To this end, Facebook has announced additional features that the company hopes will secure the application as the number one go-to. Transforming the application from a tool to chat to friends into a place where you go to do everything appears to be Facebook's strategy, thanks to AI bots.

And in this way, users can not only order food, but also book flights, buy and share music, and send money. Facebook is ensuring that users will find no need to exit the app for practically anything.

Facebook's investment is built on a deep understanding of user psychology. Marketers need not re-invent the wheel – rather, they can “plug-in” to the touch points on offer – and never in the history of marketing and advertising has client interaction been so scientifically grounded. Building your business using social media is not guess work – it's data. And the opportunities are endless.

ABOUT GIL SPERLING

Gil Sperling is cofounder and co-CEO of Flow , a proptech company that goes straight to the source of the largest social platforms in the world - to match people with property.

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