

Exclusive Interview With Mark Zuckerberg

The Face Behind thefacebook.com

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Winter 2004 - Current Magazine recently spoke with Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of thefacebook.com—now at almost 300 schools and attracting one million users. Zuckerberg, currently on leave from Harvard, talked about the popularity of thefacebook, his latest project and his favorite Greek hero.

Current Magazine: What time do you wake up in the morning?

Mark Zuckerberg: That depends. There are two modes. I keep programmer time sometimes. When you're at your computer you can get distracted by other people, so programmers tend to stay up really late and work when everyone else is asleep. So it's not really uncommon for me to stay up until 6 or 8 in the morning. The other mode is when I have a meeting. The business world does not operate between 5 pm and 8 am, so that requires some waking up for. The two kind of go together well because sometimes I'm waking up at 8 am and sometimes I'm going to bed at 8 am. So I'll go for three days without sleeping, which is really sweet.

CM: What about breakfast?

MZ: I haven't eaten breakfast in a long time. The only time I eat breakfast is when I have meetings that early in the morning. Usually it's a late lunch and then a late dinner and then a second dinner at Jack in the Box.

CM: Tell me about how thefacebook got started.

MZ: The idea for the website was motivated by a social need at Harvard to be able to identify people in other residential houses—Harvard is a fairly unfriendly place. While each residential house listed directories of their residents, I wanted one online directory where all students could be listed. And I've always enjoyed building things and puttering around with computer code, so I sat down and in about a week I had produced the basic workings of the site.

CM: And from there you spread the website to other top schools—MIT, Yale, Stanford.

MZ: Yeah, but the goal was never to be elitist. We had a launch plan to enter into other colleges based on where friends would be most likely to overlap, so the site spread organically based upon that model and now we operate on a broad spectrum of campuses. It doesn't make sense to exclude anybody or any college from the resources that thefacebook offers. This is a product that should be fun and useful for all college students.

CM: Your website was one of the first social networking sites to explicitly ground its online community on a physical one.

MZ: That's why I think the website has been such a success. We don't view the site as an online community—we bill it as a directory that is reinforcing a physical community. What exists on the site is a mirror image of what exists in real life.

CM: But at the same time, can't thefacebook distort people's perceptions of the real world?

MZ: To a certain extent, the website is unfortunate because it oversimplifies things. Everybody's concept of having a friend is different. It can definitely blur the relationships that exist between people. But in the end, I think that thefacebook can only reinforce preexisting communities. We think we have been particularly successful in strengthening those relationships that exist between people who are only "fringe friends."

CM: So in your view, are there any negative aspects to the website?

MZ: Oh sure, there are. It's not unusual for us to receive an email from somebody saying, "I spend all of my time on your website and now I have less of a social life than I had before." We would much rather have people meet people through the website and go out and party than stay at home on a Friday night reading other people's profiles. And it's surprising, but we have actually received far less complaints about stalking than we otherwise would have expected.

CM: So we hear you're taking the semester off and renting a house. How do you afford it?

MZ: We hate banner ads so we don't want to inundate the site with tons of them because we think they're ugly and distracting. So lately we've been putting thought into other advertising systems that would be less offensive. Right now we put up what we need to keep the site running, pay for servers and equipment and keep a house for ourselves. It's not that cheap—we have to make \$40,000 a month or something, but it works. The advertising revenue that we bring in changes because the size of the site doubles each month.

CM: Has Bill Gates called you yet?

MZ: No. I don't think Bill Gates makes phone calls. I'm not sure that he'd be the one to call me if Microsoft got in touch with us, but it'd be sweet if he did.

CM: What's your favorite gadget?

MZ: I have a minicomputer that I carry around, it's a mini Sony VAIO. We named it Tinkerbell.

CM: Tell us about your latest project, Wirehog.

MZ: Wirehog is a social application for transferring files between friends. You can connect to a friend's computer and browse the files, like photos, videos and music that they have, and transfer the files to your own computer.

CM: So are you a beer guy or a mixed-drink kind of guy?

MZ: Beer. [Laughing] But I'm underage. I don't drink. And my friends all make fun of me because I don't have a fake ID. They're like, "You can make websites but you can't make a fake ID?"

CM: Why haven't you gotten into the ID business?

MZ: Because it's... illegal. I really have never had a reason to have a fake ID. It's good to get into bars, but my whole take on that is that I like college parties. And I live right next to Stanford, so I go to parties there.

CM: Speaking of legal issues, what's the deal with this lawsuit against you, in 15 words or less?

MZ: Well, a waste of time and money. It's not going anywhere, they have no chance.

CM: If you could have dinner with someone, dead or alive, who would it be?

MZ: Achilles. I could reach across the table and say, "Now you know who you are fighting."

CM: How did gym class in middle school work out for you?

MZ: Gym was sweet. I actually used to be athletic. Before I went to Exeter at the end of high school, I went to public school and actually played three varsity sports. Then I got to Exeter and I was like, uhh, now I'm gonna program. I did crew, and tennis—preppy sports.

CM: Have you benefitted socially from the website?

MZ: I get more out of making the site and hearing from people who have benefitted from the site than actually using it. But the other weekend some friends and I were down in L.A. and we were able to throw an impromptu party after messaging some random people we didn't know at UCLA. That was pretty cool.

CM: Does thefacebook help you pick up girls?

MZ: It helps my friends pick up girls.

Cornell student Matt Nagowski contributed to the reporting of this article.

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