

Google+ becomes new playground for valley insiders

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There's a new way to tell if you're part of Silicon Valley's "in" crowd.

It's called Google+.

Launched just a couple of weeks ago, Google+ is the search giant's latest stab at building a social networking service. But most people are stuck outside the velvet ropes of what has quickly become the most exclusive club in the tech universe, because Google extended invitations only to a select group of bloggers, entrepreneurs and tech execs.

And to the surprise of just about everyone who has tried it, Google+ is pretty damn good.

For now, part of the appeal is its exclusivity, something that's pure catnip to early-adopter types and a bit of genius marketing by Google.

Robert Scoble, a leading tech blogger and the insider's insider, joined Google+ on day one, and as of Friday was the fifth most followed person, with 17,109 followers. In a blog post called "Why yo mamma won't use Google+ (and why that thrills me to no end)," Scoble expressed the unlikely hope that mainstream users would shun it.

"So, what is Google+ for, then? It's for us!" he wrote. "Come on now, we geeks and early adopters and social media gurus need a place to talk free of folks who think Justin Bieber is the second coming of Christ. That's what we have in Google+ right now. Do we really want to mess that up?"

Once the invite landed in my inbox, I jumped at the chance to check it out. So let me take you behind the curtain.

We'll start by playing spot the cybercelebrities. Over there is Mark Zuckerberg, who according to SocialStatistics.com, is the most followed person on Google+, with 44,871 followers. Zuckerberg hasn't posted anything publicly and has added only such scant profile details as: "I make things."

Moving on, we find Kevin Rose (ranked No. 11), founder of Digg. And goodness, there's Tom Anderson (14), co-founder of MySpace. Howdy, Tim O'Reilly, founder of the O'Reilly publishing empire (27). Hey there, Ev Williams, co-founder of Twitter (32).

And look, it's Michael Dell (50). OK, so he's a Texas guy, not a valley guy, but still. He's Michael Dell!

Some of these folks haven't really done much more than sign up and follow a few people. But others like Scoble have been spending lots of time on Google+.

Loic Le Meur (18), founder and CEO of Seesmic, a social sharing application, is a fixture on the valley's social media and conference scene, and he's amazed at how much people seem to be using the service already.

"You can see it by the number of interactions," Le Meur said. "I asked one question, and I got 150 responses. The early adopters are paying a lot of attention."

So what has captured their fancy? The look and feel is similar to Facebook, with a newsfeed running down the middle and a big profile picture in the upper left corner.

The big differences include a feature called "Hangout" that allows users to quickly create text and video chats with a group of people. And there's a feature called "Circles" that lets you limit the group of people you can share an item with, a feature that has pleased the insiders.

One of the most striking things about Google+, for now, remains the caliber of members and the clubbiness of it. Google co-founders Larry Page (2) and Sergey Brin (3) are there, but not posting much.

Vic Gundotra (4), senior vice president for engineering, and Bradley Horowitz (8) are the Google+ overlords and seem to be there all the time, both responding to feedback and sharing personal items.

"Having gotten through the trivial detail of launching Google+ (!), I recently turned my attention to even more important matters. "... Horowitz posted recently. "In the beautiful Parisian dusk, dining under the stars at Lasserre, I popped the question "... and +Irene Au agreed to marry me!"

This highlights something else remarkable about Google+. For a company that usually talks about robots and engineering and algorithms, Google's made the service feel remarkably "... human.

"With Google+, it seems they understand the importance of getting this right," said Louis Gray (28), another top tech blogger. "Not just in terms of the competition with Twitter and Facebook. But to really show the company's soul."

But the big question people are debating on Google+ these days: Does it pose a threat to Facebook?

The answer doesn't really matter. For Google, which has been ridiculed for its previous attempts at social networking, asking such a thing was unthinkable just two weeks ago.

The fact that Google+ is being taken seriously, by the geek elite at least, is a giant step forward.

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