
Friended by a Bridge

In the best of all worlds, bridges could belly up to the bar with us and watch a baseball game (or two), as well as be there to drive us home.

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Ben Mezrich's book, *The Accidental Billionaires*, tells the story of the birth of Facebook. Mezrich describes the two Facebook creators as social Harvard nerds who came up with the idea in their dorm rooms. Their simple concept was for a website that could electronically duplicate social networking. The website would create a virtual world on which college students could interact. All of the intricate social behaviors of students could play out on the website, but freed of the physical and time limitations of actual meetings.

The developers first came up with their idea by thinking of finding a better way to meet girls. Apparently they were not so successful in the non-virtual world. The website, initially named "Thefacebook," was an instant success. Within days of its initial release at Harvard, the majority of the students had signed up and prepared their own pages. From that point on, the site experienced exponential, viral growth. The site was launched for access at one college after another, and at each one it was an instant hit.

In the early days of Facebook, membership was exclusive to college communities. You could join for free, but you had to have a college email address. The site was developed for students, but that didn't stop professors from joining as well. Since I had a Tufts email address, I signed up. My plan was to snoop on my students and prepare Powerpoint presentations for class using photos from their pages. Other than my name and a picture, I didn't post much information about myself. I didn't list my likes or dislikes, or whom I wanted to meet. At this point I wasn't networking using Facebook. Even if I wanted to, I didn't have any adult friends to connect with on the site.

Facetime in the Real World

Eventually, the two Facebook founders realized that their audience was growing up, graduating college and moving on (without their college email addresses). So, to keep their customer base, they decided that membership in the Facebook club would be broadened to include everyone. At that point, the site's exponential growth increased exponentially (not sure if that's mathematically possible, but it sounds good [and Brian's editor is letting him get away with this one]). Facebook was now out to conquer the on-line world. Soon, my adult friends were becoming members, and they started to "friend" me online. (BTW, "friend" as a verb is a Facebook innovation. It means to invite someone for online friendship. To "friend" in Facebook means that you are inviting someone to be recognized as part of your online list of friends. BTW, "BTW" is a

widely texted abbreviation for the expression "by the way.") Of course, we were friends already in real life, but this friendship was a new type spawned on the website. We would be electronically linked, with special privileges like being able to see each other's wall, photo albums, videos and all sorts of other intimate electronic secrets contained on the Facebook pages.

After a while, the adults started to get into it. Just like with kids, there was a certain social competitiveness by seeing who could garner the greater number of friends on your page. College and grade school kids had hundreds and even thousands of Facebook friends, but for adults, topping a hundred meant that you were wildly popular. If I did keep track of how many friends my friends had, I would have noticed that I had more virtual friends than most of my friends. This statistic meant either that I was very popular and cool, or that I was a nerd limited to bragging about my virtual social success.

An Inanimate Friend

At about the time I made the transition to an actual, social Facebook user, I was friended by a bridge. I was invited for friendship by the Capilano Suspension Bridge in British Columbia. The Capilano Suspension Bridge is a Canadian tourist attraction near Vancouver. It is a daring pedestrian cable bridge suspended high over a deep gorge. For visitors to Vancouver, it is someplace to go. During our honeymoon, my wife Lauren and I spent a few days in Vancouver and since it was a prominent bridge, of course we visited.

Bridges are great, and I was pleased to become friends with the Capilano Suspension Bridge. However, I was a little bit confused by the request. Although bridges are excellent structures, they are definitely not alive, so it was not clear to me how the bridge could friend me, or why it would even want to. Yet, I could not resist and I accepted the invitation. The bridge entered my Facebook social network.

Building a Relationship

Over time, we got to know each other, at least

virtually. The bridge has a fairly robust network of friends and activities, especially considering that it is inanimate (well, it does sway in the wind, but still it's not sentient — yet). In many ways, our new bond bridged our differences (being primarily one of living versus not being alive) and I started to see the bridge as more alive than he really was. I could see from our friendship that Capilano, or Cappy, as I like to call him, lives a charmed, exciting life, hanging as he does in that precarious position over the gorge. Cappy is also quite the party bridge. He's a swinger who's always on the lookout for fun and a good time.

With the world coming to Vancouver for the Winter Olympics in February 2010, Cappy apparently was attracting a lot of attention. After one's fill of skiing and curling (that's ice shuffleboard to the uninitiated), visiting a nice bridge turned out to be a good way to round out the trip. Cappy was greeted by hordes of new visitors, and not just on-line guests, but actual live human beings. It must have been exciting for him to meet all of those new people.

Just Like Us

So, in the end, I was pleased to learn that on Facebook bridges are like people. After being friended by the Capilano Suspension Bridge, I decided to take the bull by the horns and invite other bridges for friendship. To date, I have friended the Golden Gate Bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge and the Verrazano Bridge. The Sydney Harbor Bridge has not accepted my friendship yet — she is truly playing hard to get — but I hope that some day she will enter the orbit of my bridge friends as well. In addition to having great new bridge colleagues, my overall friend total has increased and I have become even more popular than before. Not that I'm keeping count.

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