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You've got a friend ... of a friend ... of a friend ...

'Friend of a Friend' networks changing online relationshipsBy Christine Boese
CNN Headline News
Monday, December 8, 2003 Posted: 8:49 AM EST (1349 GMT)

(CNN) -- In my last column, on the metaphysics of spam, I was whining about how spam is taking all the joy out of e-mail, and that we may be neglecting the people we care about in the process of being inundated.

I think it's time to try a new approach to online relationships. I'm not sure if this solution will actually help, but it does seem better than doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.

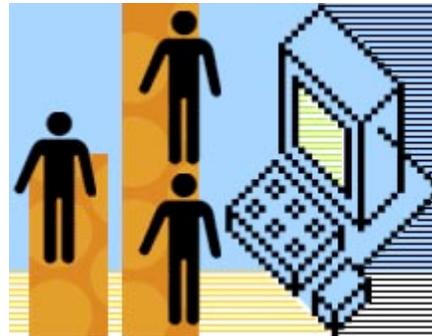
The idea is to put people and relationships in the center, rather than chronological lists, screen space or any of the other things that distract us from what matters most.

Move over Kevin Bacon

The buzz is out on social network software online, what is commonly called "Friend of a Friend" networks, or FOAF for short. Recently there was a bidding war over a software patent, an application that supposedly can manage relationships in your life like the "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" game.

What was most interesting in the auction were the bidders who *didn't* win: The first was the hot online dating pool-cum-social experiment Friendster, and the second was the online giant Yahoo! The two guys who took the prize own 2.5 percent of Friendster but are also the founders of a rival venture, Tribe.net, and LinkedIn.

While many young people and coastal hipsters are swarming to the saucy social scene at Friendster, the idea of FOAF networks is still hashing itself out in geekland. Some techies want to make FOAF code free and standard across Web sites, out of the control of various commercial vendors.



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How does FOAF work?

Your life is a series of interlocking social circles of varying degrees of closeness. Your family and closest friends are the innermost circle and the folks who you don't want to neglect. Then there are outer circles. Some circles are localized: your bowling team, friends at work and classmates. Maybe one of the bridesmaids in your wedding hooked up with a dude on the bowling team, so some circles overlap.

FOAF software tools such as Friendster, Tribe, Tickle, Ryze, LinkedIn and others help to make social networks visible and explicit. Faces of your buds shine out at you when you log on. You feel connected to them, rather than staring at an impersonal list of crude spam come-ons. Some platforms keep your networks private, while others let friends view it.

The tools are used for business networking, dating, social get-togethers, selling that used lawn mower or finding an apartment in a strange town.

I like the idea that if I hand-pick each person in my network, spam shouldn't be able to get in. I'd like to see this software develop finer-tuned layers of "trust" within its code structure, rather than just the testimonials used now. eBay is evolving such a system for trusted sellers.

Gaming, privacy, and trust

Some strategies used on FOAF sites move toward goofy fake characters and creative performances, acting out, or trying to list thousands as your "friends."

In a world where privacy is shrinking, certain elements of FOAF profiles let the very thing you should be guarding out of the bag. Some people make up their personal details, but that seems to undermine the very idea of trust.

Meanwhile, privacy advocates worry FOAF will become a great data stream to be mined by merchants and those who would invade our lives to cheapen rather than enrich our relationships.

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