other users' messages (this is known as "following"). The messages were visible to the public by default, but users could restrict the messages to only their followers if they chose. According to popular lore, Twitter's tipping point in adoption came at the 2007 South by Southwest Interactive Conference (an important film, interactive media, and music conference held in Austin, Texas, every Spring) where two large plasma screens had been placed in the hallways to stream twitter messages exclusively. The tweets were captivating, and soon the entire conference was buzzing about this new social medium. Twitter's revenue model was based on paid advertising by organizations that wanted to purchase "promoted tweets" based on search terms (similar to Google's Adwords). By 2012, Twitter had 112 million active users, and by the first quarter of 2015, it had 288 million average users per month.[g] Though Twitter's growth had been impressive, many observers did not believe it posed a serious threat to Facebook as its reliance on the "tweeting" model meant that it appealed only to a subset of Facebook users (other Facebook users were more motivated to maintain pages with photos, group memberships, etc.), and Facebook had countered the Twitter threat by incorporating similar features (such as status updates with real-time updating) in its "news feed" application. Making matters worse for Twitter, a new entrant, Instagram, threatened to usurp Twitter's role in microblogging. Launched in late 2010, Instagram (from "instant camera" and "telegram") focused on enabling users to share photos and videos with short comments. It took off rapidly with a young audience, and had accrued 30 million users by 2012. Worried that it might miss out on a new social networking demographic, Facebook acquired Instagram in 2012 for about $1 billion. Instagram grew to 300 million active users by 2015, making it a solid rival to Twitter.[h]

There were dozens of other social networking sites that emerged over this time period, including several that gained wide popularity within more narrowly defined markets. Hi5, for example, was founded in 2003, growing out of a matchmaking site for South Asian singles. This would become a very popular social networking site in Asia, attracting nearly 5 million users by 2007. LinkedIn took a more serious approach and positioned itself more as a professional networking site. Though never gaining popularity among the young people that drove the huge traffic on sites such as Myspace and Facebook, it grew steadily and reached 332 million users by 2015.

Analysts speculated that a bigger threat could be posed by Google. From 2007 to 2012, Google introduced a number of would-be competing social network platforms, including a Friendster-like site called Orkut, a social networking site development platform called OpenSocial, and a tool for social networking sites called Friend Connect. None of these gained much traction, however. Google then developed a product to compete more directly with Twitter, called Google Buzz. However, by default this program made users' e-mail addresses publicly visible, leading a scandal in which the Electronic Privacy Information Center filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission claiming that that Buzz "violated user expectations, diminished user privacy, contradicted Google's privacy policy, and may have violated federal wiretap laws."[i] Google's settlement with the FTC subjected Google to privacy audits for the next 20 years.

Undeterred, in 2011, Google launched a product to compete directly against Facebook called Google+. Google+ enabled users to share photos and status