

Timing of Entry

From SixDegrees.com to Facebook: The Rise of Social Networking Sites

In the 1960s, Stanley Milgram addressed a number of letters to a friend of his, a stockbroker in Boston. Milgram then distributed these letters to a random selection of people in Nebraska. He instructed the individuals to pass the letters to the addressee by sending them to a person they knew on a first-name basis who seemed in some way closer (socially, geographically, etc.) to the stockbroker. This person would then do the same, until the letters reached their final destination. Many of the letters did eventually reach the stockbroker, and Milgram found that on average, the letters had passed through six individuals en route. Milgram had demonstrated that the world was indeed small, and dubbed this finding "six degrees of separation."^a This finding, which inspired both the John Guare play "Six Degrees of Separation" and the 1993 film by the same name, also inspired one of the very first social networking sites. Started in 1997 by Andrew Weinreich, SixDegrees.com sought to leverage both the growing popularity of the Internet and people's curiosity about to whom they might be connected—or connectable. The site enabled users to create profiles and invite their friends to join.^b SixDegrees attracted three million members, but many users felt that not enough of their friends were members to make it an interesting destination, and there was little to do on the site beyond inviting and accepting friend requests.^c The company soon ran out of money, and it shut down in 2000.

Friendster was launched in March of 2003 by former Netscape engineer Jonathan Abrams with \$400,000 in seed money and a similar concept to SixDegrees.com. In fact, Friendster would even show you a network map of you and your acquaintances, lending imagery to the "six degrees of separation" concept. It also used this map to determine who had permission to view which pages—dramatically increasing the computer time required for users to access pages. In its first six months Friendster attracted about 1.5 million users and Google offered to acquire it for \$30 million. Abrams declined the offer, and instead raised \$13 million in venture capital.^d Later that year *Time* magazine declared Friendster was one of the "coolest inventions of 2003." Like Six Degrees, though the site was very popular, the infrastructure for social networking (and the knowledge about what was required to efficiently manage a social networking site) was in its infancy. The number of members rapidly grew to seven million, but