Apple's Ping: iTunes Gets Social

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iTunes 10.0 – Music 2.0?

The launch of Ping, Apple's addition to its new iTunes software, brings social networking functions to its well-established music and entertainment store. This announcement comes on the eve of MySpace's revamp and suggestions that Spotify is planning a US launch; all suggesting that the combination of social and music could be the one of the major battlefronts in the online entertainment space. What does this mean for fans, brands and bands?

Anti-Social?

In its initial form, Ping in theory allows users to follow their favourite artists and see what music their friends are listening to. Sounds compelling. However, after testing Ping, we found that it currently struggles to deliver on its core proposition. On top of this, Ping also suffers from what is, in many ways, Apple's greatest strength and its greatest weakness: its closed nature. Despite the fact that Facebook and Twitter both have massive existing audiences, and are used by many other social platforms to grow their own audiences, iTunes currently has no way to link your Ping profile with your Twitter or Facebook account (or last.fm or MySpace for that matter) thus limiting its social reach.

Things Can Only Get Better

Despite these teething problems, there a number of reasons why Ping can improve and start to provide a meaningful service to users and advertisers. Ping has only just launched and yet it has already topped over 1 million users out of a total of 165 million iTunes users. Furthermore if Ping successfully combines with the Genius software, iTunes could become an incredibly powerful recommendation engine. The potential for brands to associate themselves with artists is growing more popular with marketers by the day, and iTunes could be leveraged to break new ground in matching brands to audiences via a common passion around bands or musical genres.

Apple's competitors have been successful in establishing their own models, e.g., MySpace specializes in showcasing up and coming band, last.fm's default status as the modern music fan's jukebox. However, Apple has the advantage of actually taking consumers from music discovery to actual purchase, now including concerts; an attractive proposition to consumers and bands that may end up migrating their attention and budgets from places like MySpace to iTunes. On the other hand, Ping may simply be a short-term tactic to help iTunes fight off the rise of rival download services, powered by MP3 aggregators such as CompareDownload.com, which help consumers find the cheapest tracks and albums.

The launch of Ping is a smart move that hedges Apple's bets against their competitors and new business models. However, if Apple truly wishes to start a social network it may have to become slightly more social itself.