

# Catering to Web-savvy moms

By MATHEW INGRAM

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Teenagers, twentysomethings and geeks were probably the first to use Web-based social networking sites such as MySpace, YouTube and Facebook. But their appeal has continued to spread beyond the high school nerd set, and so have the number of companies trying to use those networking tools to appeal to an attractive demographic.

And what's one of the most appealing demographics, with a host of built-in -- and often expensive -- needs, including the need to socialize? Moms. Not surprisingly, the past six months has seen a proliferation of social networking sites and services aimed at urban and Web-savvy moms.

MommyClub.ca, which started in 2005 as a Calgary-based community and advertising network, officially launched as a national Web service this week. The company plans to roll out a network of local sites -- including online calendars and other tools for planning playgroups, birthday parties and other events -- in most major Canadian cities.

The site says it offers discussion groups, private messaging to other moms, public and private blogs, an ovulation calendar and resource guides that users can vote on to recommend to others. There is also a Recipe Box that users can contribute to, and an Activity Trunk to help keep kids entertained.

Meanwhile, **Kaboose** -- a Toronto-based network of family-oriented websites, including BabyZone.com -- says it plans to pursue a social networking strategy in 2007 and will build and acquire properties that fit within its network.

South of the border, a company called MomJunction announced earlier this month that it had raised \$1.5-million (U.S.) in financing from a number of prominent investors, including Philadelphia fitness guru Pat Croce.

The site, which founder Sang Kim says he started after working at home and seeing how much work his wife did raising their two children, has what it calls a patented feature called the "Ripple," which allows users in a group to cross-post items that their friends have posted. But MomJunction.com joins an increasingly crowded space.

Some existing sites aimed at the same target group include MothersClick, Mommybuzz, ParentsConnect (owned by MTV) and Maya's Mom (mayasmom.com), launched in October with financing from technology executives such as Flickr.com founder Caterina Fake and Yahoo's Jeff Ralston. There's also ConnectingMoms, started by a former AOL marketing executive, and Famster, Minti and RaisingThem.com.

There's also a social networking site called CareSquare that is aimed at helping parents -- including lesbian and gay parents -- find and hire babysitters, nannies and other caregivers, something that many Web-savvy parents now do through online classified services such as Craigslist. On CareSquare, caregivers can upload their information and parents can search for services they need and recommend them to other parents.

Some of the existing mom-focused websites -- what you might call "Web 1.0"-style, without the blogs and wikis and so on -- are revamping to offer social networking services. ClubMom, for example, was founded in 1999 by Meredith Vieira (former host of ABC's *The View*) and entrepreneur Michael Sanchez, and got financing from well-known venture capital firms such as Draper Fisher Jurvetson.

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ClubMom offers mothers "reward points" that they can redeem for discounts on merchandise from the site's advertisers. Last fall, the site launched TheMommyNetwork and then a stand-alone site called CafeMom designed to offer access to blogs, private messaging and other services Web users have come to expect.

Some advertisers have even taken the game into their own hands and started their own social networking sites. **Procter & Gamble Co.**, one of the world's largest consumer products companies, started a site called VocalPoint last fall. It offers "access to products and samples before your friends," as well as the ability to take part in focus groups. According to a recent story in BusinessWeek, VocalPoint already has more than 600,000 moms signed up for its service.

**Johnson & Johnson**, another giant consumer products company, announced last fall that it was starting something called the Mom Blogger Project, but so far hasn't launched anything publicly. MommyClub.ca also has some overlap between site and advertiser: Michelle Davis, a founder and co-owner, is the CEO of one of the site's major sponsors -- a spiritual health and travel business called Purelife.

Existing blog networks for women, including BlogHer, take a dim view of efforts such as VocalPoint, which they describe as thinly disguised marketing efforts with no benefit apart from access to discounted products. But it's clear that advertisers have caught the social-networking bug, and see it as a direct route to connect with potential customers.