Introducing MySpace

Myspace is a phenomenon in its own right. Chances are you already know what MySpace is all about, and, indeed, you may even have your own MySpace profile. This book will help you design a truly awesome profile.

The purpose of Part I is to not only give you an understanding of where MySpace fits into the greater context of the Internet but also to provide the building blocks you need to understand some of the hacks later in the book.

By the end of Part I you'll have an understanding of HyperText Markup Language (HTML) as well as of cascading style sheets (CSS). You'll also learn how to place code in your profile and how to use an HTML or text editor to compose your code. Part I also covers how to upload images to file-hosting web sites, or to your own web site, so that they can be embedded in your profile.

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Making MySpace Your Space

Do you want your MySpace profile to make an impact? Do you want it to stand out from the crowd? Or maybe you just want to develop a MySpace profile that better reflects who you are as an individual? MySpace (www.myspace.com — see Figure 1-1) has more than 80 million profiles at the time of this writing, which makes it very easy for your profile to get lost in the plethora of profiles that are all competing for attention.

A profile that consists solely of programming tricks doesn't necessarily translate into a profile that is appealing — in fact, if you go overboard, such tricks can make your profile look too busy and can make it look like you're trying too hard.

To create a cool profile, you need style and good content in addition to technical prowess. While some might argue that style can't be taught, this book certainly points out some of the traps for the unwary and also provides advice on how to generate interesting content.

What Is MySpace?

Before embarking on the journey to develop a cool MySpace profile, it's worth reflecting on what MySpace is about and why it's so popular. This will help you to develop a clear idea of what you're trying to achieve.

MySpace is a "social networking" web site. There are more than 200 social networking web sites in existence, and their success can be largely attributed to the human need for connection with others. For many people, such web sites provide a way to extend their real-world circles of friends and acquaintances, or to find other people with similar interests. Some people even use a social networking site to meet romantic partners, while for others it's a way to escape the daily grind of their mundane lives — after all, almost anyone can be cool on MySpace.

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FIGURE 1-1: MySpace has captured the imagination of millions of users.

At a fundamental level, social networking web sites are designed to mimic how people tend to make friends in real life — by meeting new people through existing friends and acquaintances.

When you first join MySpace, you create a profile where you can post pictures and provide information about yourself and your interests. You can even write a blog, which is an online journal where you share your thoughts and feelings.

Once your profile is set up, you can invite your real-world friends to join MySpace as well. They then become your MySpace "friends." They, in turn, can invite their own friends, and so on. To make a new friend, you simply get in touch with your friend's friend. A friend of a friend is in a sense endorsed by your common friend, so you can be more confident that they're not an axe murderer (though there's no guarantee about this; even axe murderers have friends). Keep in mind, however, that even your friend might not truly trust the person who is declared their "MySpace" friend. It's very easy to declare someone a friend, but not as easy to get to know them well enough for a real endorsement. In this way, you'll find that a network of friends on MySpace can mirror relationships in the real world.

Who Do You Want to Be?

"Who do you want to be?" It's worth asking yourself this question before you get too much further into the book. You might be tempted to say that you want to be yourself, as you are in your everyday life, which is a fair answer.

The problem is that people who visit your profile will know you only from the information you provide, by the design of your profile, and through your photographs. They won't actually get to see "you," only the "you" that you choose to present.

On MySpace, you have a lot of control over how other people will perceive you — in fact probably a lot more control than you do in real life.

Don't think of control in terms of deception; think of it in terms of having the opportunity to present yourself in the best possible light.

On MySpace, it's your turn of phrase, or how much effort you've put into your profile, that reflects what kind of person you are. What you choose not to reveal is as important as what you do reveal.

It's really important to differentiate yourself from everyone else. Start asking yourself what makes you different, and how you can highlight this in your profile.

Moreover, what makes MySpace exciting is that you can also search and browse MySpace's existing members outside your network and ask them to become your friend. Of course, you don't have the same safety mechanism as when you invite friends of friends to be your friend, but it is a lot more exciting, and there are a lot of cool people on MySpace for you to meet.

Why MySpace Is Cool

MySpace offers a lot of flexibility in terms of how you structure your profile, and what you put into it. Because you can put programming codes into your actual profile, you have a lot of latitude for creativity — as you'll see when you browse or search profiles. So for example, you can play music and videos in your profile, or change the background colors, change the shape of the cursor, or completely rearrange the layout of your profile. You just can't do this with many other social networking web sites.

MySpace is arguably the most popular social networking web site, with more than 80 million profiles, compared to Friendster, another well-known social networking web site, with 27 million profiles at the time of writing.

Another reason MySpace is so popular is that it gives you the freedom to express yourself without the limitations of other social networking sites, like Friendster, where there seems to be a focus on keeping things under control and nice, and users can't customize their profiles quite to the same degree as they can on MySpace. MySpace has tapped into the alternative music scene, and so has attracted a hip, young crowd with profiles that are edgier and more diverse. A quick browse of MySpace profiles demonstrates that users really are free to express themselves however they please. You'll come across everyone from musicians, to bikers, to Goths, to pagans, to plain old computer nerds, and of course everyone in between. You'll also notice that some people seem quite uninhibited online. For example, you'll find pictures of people showing off their tattoos — as you can see in Figure 1-2. With MySpace becoming a part of the News Limited media empire, the new management has made a push to clean things up, although of course MySpace is still relatively "cool."
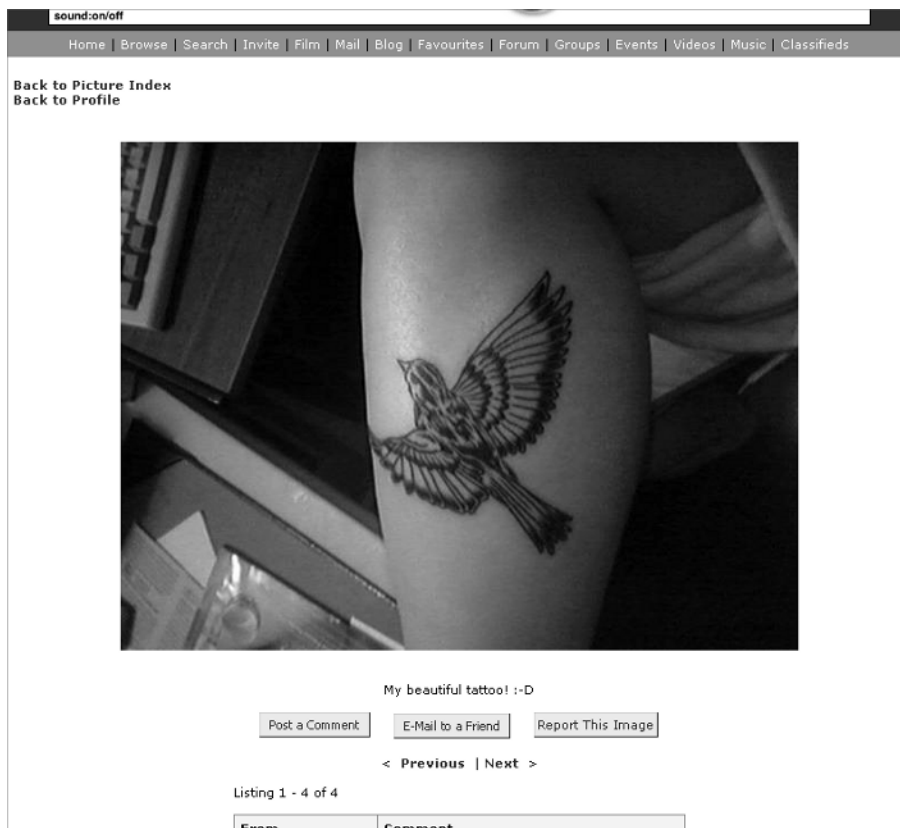

FIGURE 1-2: "Lyttle Ravyn" showing off her tattoo

Credibility in the Music Industry

Another factor behind MySpace's success is its credibility in the music industry and the fact that it has been a launching pad for a number of emerging bands such as Hollywood Undead (`www.myspace.com/hollywoodundead`), West Grand (`www.myspace.com/westgrand`) and Fall Out Boy (`www.myspace.com/falloutboy`). Canadian metal band Time is the Enemy (`www.myspace.com/tite`) was discovered by its label INgrooves on MySpace. More than half a million bands have MySpace web pages where they provide music clips and band information, and talk to fans.

For example, if you visit the Hollywood Undead MySpace page (see Figure 1-3), not only can you find out about the band, but you can also play their music and become a "friend" or, actually, a fan (I doubt you can really be friends with a band that has thousands of "friends"). At the time of this writing, the Hollywood Undead had more than 180,000 "friends" and their songs had been played more than 7 million times.

FIGURE 1-3: MySpace helped the band Hollywood Undead (www.myspace.com/ hollywoodundead) break into the mainstream.

The Popular Guy Hack

The kinds of "hacks" we cover in this book are all inoffensive — they're simply designed to help you develop an amazing profile. There are, however, some mischievous hackers who take things too far, and the now famous "popular guy" hack, also known as the Samy Worm, is a great example of this.

Written by MySpace member Samy, the "popular guy" hack was actually a worm designed to make Samy the most popular guy on MySpace. Whenever someone viewed Samy's profile, that person automatically made Samy their friend — without their permission. This was interesting enough, but Samy decided to go further. He created a hack where anyone who viewed a profile where Samy was already a friend also automatically made Samy a friend on their profile. So, if ten people viewed Samy's profile, Samy would have ten new friends. If 10 people viewed the profiles of each of these new friends, Samy would have an additional 100 friends, and so on.

Ten hours after Samy placed the worm code in his profile, he had over 1,000 friends. Thirteen hours later he had almost 9,000 friends. Eighteen hours later he had almost 1,000,000 friends. Samy tried to stop the worm, but it was too late — it had a life of its own.

The exponential increase in Samy's friends meant that the MySpace servers become overloaded and had to be shut down temporarily while the worm was disabled.

The worm made the news in the mainstream media. T-shirts with "Samy is my hero" were sold online, and Samy became something of a cult hero. Luckily for Samy, MySpace chose not to take legal action.

Samy told Google Blogoscoped's Philipp Lenssen (`blog.outer-court.com`) that he believes badly designed MySpace profiles cause more damage than his work: "It is true that many people go overboard with their HTML layouts, and I believe that such 'yellow on blue' page layouts cause much more damage in the long run than my worm did."

Obviously Samy has a cheeky sense of humor, but it does give you something to think about when designing your profile.

The online popularity of the Hollywood Undead led to their being the first band signed by MySpace's record label MySpace Records, a joint venture between MySpace and music label Interscope. MySpace Records also released a compilation album, MySpace Records Volume 1, that features bands that are popular on MySpace.

And with other record labels regularly scouring MySpace for new talent, MySpace is the place to be for new and aspiring musicians. MySpace provides an opportunity for garage bands to build a profile and maybe even break into the big time.

Incidentally, it's not only new bands that use MySpace to promote their work. Established acts such as Nine Inch Nails, Black Eyed Peas, and Audio Slave have used MySpace to promote new releases. The television industry has also gotten in on the act. NBC promoted its sitcom *The Office* on MySpace (`www.myspace.com/theoffice`).

The point is that MySpace has captured the public's imagination. Whether you want to make friends, meet a girlfriend or boyfriend, tell the world what you have to say, launch a music career, or just find out what the buzz is about, the starting point is to create a distinctive profile that gets attention.

Beware the Dark Side

It's also worth pointing out that there is a dark side to MySpace, and it's not something that affects just MySpace: It's something that affects all social networking sites. Bad people are just as good at using computers as good people. In fact, the anonymity of the Internet is an attraction for all kinds of deviants and practical jokers, who use forums such as MySpace to deceive people for their own amusement or for personal gain.

Any woman who places an even slightly revealing or provocative picture of herself on MySpace will be inundated with comments from men of all ages, many of whom are not shy about expressing the kind of relationship they are looking for. So yes, there is a sleazy side to social networking sites.

You can never be absolutely sure about a stranger you meet on MySpace. It's not uncommon, for example, for married men to pretend they are single so that they can play the field. It's also not uncommon for men to pretend that they are pretty young women just to get kicks when other men start propositioning them. The giveaway is usually that the profile features pictures of an impossibly beautiful woman, with lots of suggestive innuendo in the profile itself. These types of profiles are also sometimes fronts for adult web sites — so don't get too excited if a beautiful woman (if you happen to be male) wants to be your "friend." More often than not she is not what she appears to be. Sometimes, deviants are more clever and less obvious, so in all cases it's best to be cautious.

Increasingly, MySpace profiles are being used to sell questionable products and multi-level marketing scams — don't be surprised if you get a friend request from someone who claims he can make you rich through lotto or who wants to give you a free iPod. As in real life, if it seems too good to be true, it usually is too good to be true.

Wrapping Up

With its continuing involvement in the music industry, and its cool, young membership, MySpace is an amazing world, full of possibilities and opportunities. And while it's great to embrace this exciting frontier, it's also important to be aware of the possible dangers — as I mentioned, bad guys have computers, too.