

LEADER-POST

Service pays you for online popularity

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For countless Canadians, hours devoted to e-mailing, social networking and blogging can add up to a second job without pay. But a Montreal-based service launching this week aims to change that, supplementing people's surfing with cheques that reward a strong online presence.

Put simply, the more Facebook or MySpace "friends" you have, e-mails you send out, or traffic you attract to your YouTube videos, the greater your potential earnings.

Flipping the prevailing model of paying Internet site owners for commercial space, Weblo.com pays the people using those sites to put ads on their personal pages. Every friend that clicks on an ad placed on one of your "digital assets" -- a link embedded in your e-mail signature, for instance -- will yield roughly 10 cents in real money, with the cumulative earnings paid out each month.

While it's doubtful anyone will get rich off this -- save perhaps Weblo, which charges advertisers for its matchmaking efforts -- the notion of letting individual content-creators financially benefit from their efforts is slowly gaining acceptance.

"When YouTube was sold for \$1.6 billion, the users didn't see any of that," says Rocky Mirza, CEO of Weblo. "If content is the new currency, then you should be getting paid for it."

Kelly Ledingham was one of the first to register for the ad-hosting service on Tuesday.

The web savvy 22-year-old is hoping her 405 Facebook friends will help her turn a profit: According to Weblo's generous -- albeit highly unlikely -- "InterNet Worth" calculations, Ledingham's digital assets carry a potential value of \$62,687.

"I might as well try and make money, especially when I'm on Facebook on a daily basis," says Ledingham. "I haven't heard (any feedback) from my friends yet, but I'd like to see the option of more ads."

Because all the major content-sharing sites have their own advertisers, Weblo has to be a bit stealthy with its application. Ad text and links are slipped into spaces where users would otherwise type information related to their personal interests (in the case of Facebook) or a video's contents (in the case of YouTube). They're easy to miss, but also easily clicked-on by accident.

James McQuivey, a media technology analyst with Forrester Research, says the service piggybacks on similar concepts by Google, via its AdSense program, and Amazon Affiliates, both of which allow individuals to monetize their personal web pages with ad links.

Taking that model a step further, he notes that video-sharing site Revver actually shares advertising revenue with its contributors, while Metacafe uses a pay-per-view formula to reward content popularity; as of this week, the top 10 producers on the latter site had amassed between \$14,000 and \$31,000 each, with the top producer having earned close to \$70,000.

"There are a lot of people making money online," says McQuivey. "But the fact is, very few individual contributors are getting any direct financial benefit from their participation in online communities ... The question of, 'If there's money to be made here, who should get a piece of it?' is a pretty big one."

Gabriella Coleman, an assistant professor of media, culture and communication at New York University, predicts the biggest hurdle for Weblo's ads will be with Facebook because the site is more people-driven than content-driven. In other words, people log on to Facebook to catch up with friends and enjoy content on the side, while on YouTube they log on explicitly to view content.