Snapchat's subtle secrets to success

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What exactly is so great about Snapchat?

By now, you've probably heard of **Snapchat**. It's an app that lets you send quickly disappearing messages, photos, and videos, either directly to select friends or to everyone who follows your **Snapchat** account.

It's a simple concept, maybe even dumb. But in spite of that—or perhaps because of **it—Snapchat** has become a phenomenon. eMarketer projects that nearly 20% of Americans will use Snapchat this year. By 2020, the research service says, 85 million Americans could be using it. **Snapchat** isn't US-centric—the app is popular in other countries, too. And though it may have been youth-centric at the start, it's starting to catch on with people over the age of 25. Even US first lady Michelle Obama has an account now.

I've been a **Snapchat** user since 2013. And the more popular the service gets, the more questions I get about it. They all seem to revolve around why, when, and how to use Snapchat.

The confusion is understandable. On the surface, **Snapchat** sounds like a lot of other apps out there. Indeed, **Instagram, Vine, YouTube**, and the like all do some similar things. But there are a lot of unique qualities that have attracted me and over 100 million other users to Snapchat.

It's more about creating content than just passively absorbing it

Unlike **Facebook, Twitter,** or **Instagram,** the first thing you see when you open **Snapchat** isn't a massive feed of information. It's a camera.

That's on purpose, and it's telling of **Snapchat's** strategy. The whole idea behind the app is to nudge users into creating content to send to a friend—even if it's just goofy videos. **Snapchat** has developed products around this, like Live Stories, where **Snapchat** curators pick snaps (what the kids call pictures and videos on Snapchat) from a particular location and turn it into a story from the event, like, say, an NBA basketball game or the E3 videogame expo.

The push toward making, rather than consuming, content, has paid off. **CEO Evan Spiegel** recently told investors that the service was getting 10 billion video views a day, up from 2 billion

views in May 2015.

It's vertical-video friendly

Pre-Snapchat, watching videos on your phone often forced you to turn your phone horizontally, or watch a video in a short but wide box on a screen held vertically. And that's fine—most people have no trouble with that. But for people who primarily use their phones vertically (i.e. most of us), taking and watching videos with your phone upright just makes more sense.

When it comes to creating content, it's much quicker to take videos and pictures without having to readjust your hands or your phone. And because it reduced the friction in creating content, Snapchat's vertical orientation has quickly become the defacto format for mobile video. **YouTube** uses it now, and so do Meerkat and Periscope. Snapchat also has influenced major publishers —like **MTV, CNN, ESPN, Vice, Comedy Central**, and other partners on **Snapchat** Discover, a video news and entertainment product in the app—to go vertical.

It's private

One of the big reasons I use **Snapchat** regularly is the company's focus on privacy—not in the sense of keeping my information secure (the service, including my info, was hacked back in December 2015) but in terms of how I share my content, and with whom.

With Snapchat, content is inherently private, and it's up to me if I want to broadcast something to all of my followers.

When you send a snap, the app prompts you to send it to your friends, but you can also choose to make it into a Story, which makes it visible to all your followers for 24 hours. Essentially, you can privately message your photos and videos if you want, or make them public to your followers. That's different from other social platforms, where content is far more public, and keeping it private is often an afterthought.

Snaps also disappear, which is a key feature. Once you view a snap, it evaporates. And after a Story on **Snapchat** runs for 24 hours, it's gone. **Snapchat** says that the images are deleted from its servers, too. That's compelling for young people, who may not have learned to stay out of trouble on **social** media but are finding it easier to do so.

It's authentic and unfiltered

Unlike a lot of other millennials, I rarely use Instagram. It seems too fake to me—almost every post I see there is the most glossy, least authentic, version of real life. When people text me to "like" their most recent Instagram post, it feels like a cross between a photo contest and a popularity contest.

Snapchat is much less structured than that. There's nothing to "like" on **Snapchat.** And there's

no frame around the content to remind you of what platform you're **on—Snapchat** videos take up the entire phone screen, making them feel more immersive, and less staged to fit into a particular frame. (If you were viewing the video below in **Snapchat** itself, all you would see is the video.)

The transient nature of **Snapchat** convinces users that it's ok to share content that is only temporarily interesting. And if your content fails to meet even that bar, Snapchat's designed so that your shame isn't permanent. There's no sense here that you're creating things for posterity. And with that notion sticking in the back of users' minds, the result is content that seems more genuine than what you can find anywhere else.

It's relevant

Twitter is a disaster when it comes to organizing content. With a never-ending stream of tweets, many of which are filled with useless banter (including most of mine), it's hard to keep track of things that are actually interesting. Products like **Twitter** Lists are poorly implemented and algorithmic sorting hasn't helped.

Meanwhile, my **Facebook** newsfeed is usually stuffed with things I could do without, like posts from people I wouldn't really consider friends in real life and therefore have only minimal interest in hearing about, and articles from websites with headlines that make the articles sound interesting but they really aren't. Only a small sliver of content on my **Facebook** feed is actually meaningful to me, like a college friend's recent engagement pictures.

Snapchat's a lot different. There's a lot of content on it, but it's only from people I care enough about to follow. Newstand-style products like Discover are there, but even that content often feels relevant to me. **(Snapchat's** done a great job picking great brands and publishers that create content that reaches Snapchat's core demographics.)

It could be that **Facebook** and **Twitter** have become portals for information rather than truly **social** media, which doesn't make them any less valuable. It just makes them less of a window into the lives of our actual friends. And that's where Snapchat excels.

It's fun

Almost every significant update recently—the addition of goofy stickers, funky lenses, interesting geofilters, and a more robust messaging service—all seem to revolve around a desire to keep **Snapchat** fun, even for content venturing deep into wonkiness.

Even Discover content, which is probably the least exciting part of **Snapchat,** is still much more engaging and interesting than Twitter Moments. Fun is fleeting, of course, but **Snapchat's** near maniacal focus on entertainment makes the app enjoyable for users, and keeps me coming back.

The network effect

While Snapchat's [done some marketing](#) to promote itself, the platform primarily has grown through word of mouth. That's about as powerful an effect there is when it comes to social media—because when it comes to messaging apps, the more friends you have on it, the more useful and entertaining the app is.

This so-called network effect feeds on itself, making it easier for **Snapchat** to keep attracting users. It also a reason why it's been so difficult to copy the service. **Facebook** tried already, with an app called Slingshot that it [ended up shuttering](#).

Facebook and **Google** have strong networks, too, and they can easily create products that they can force users to download (like **Facebook** and its Messenger app). But with [150 million daily users](#), who spend on average a half an hour a day using the Snapchat app, supplanting Snapchat at this point might be too tough a task.

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