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Text: David Resnick used it to break through the anxiety and isolation of people who stutter. Joe Saad launched a business. M. Monica Malone, an extrovert whose damaged immune system left her a shut-in, found a way she could give back to others. Brandon Hartung and Stacy Frazer found each other.

Google's social network, Google+, has attracted more than 90 million users since it launched seven months ago, a mere fraction of Facebook's 850 million users. But a surprise star is emerging on Google+ -- its "Hangouts" videoconferencing feature.

While videoconferencing technology is not new, Google is the first to create a free service on the Internet "cloud" that requires no special hardware beyond a webcam, has a simple interface allowing up to 10 people to connect together, and is woven into a big online social network. One videoconferencing competitor, New York-based ooVoo, allows up to six people to connect for free on a video chat, and says its user population more than doubled to more than 38 million people in 2011.

"It really could transform the way we interact with each other from our homes or our workplaces, and I think this is going to be huge," said Paul Allen, the founder of Ancestry.com and an unofficial Google+ tracker who believes Hangouts will help drive the social network to 400 million users by the end of 2012 and spawn "thousands" of online businesses.

Hangouts, which works with smartphones, tablets or desktop computers, is rapidly being adapted by an inventive community of users, who have done everything from launch musical careers through online video concerts to Saad's startup, ChefHangout.com, which allows customers to book cooking classes over a Google+ Hangout.

"It is a new medium; it is a new way to communicate," said Saad, who has a Dallas-based mergers and acquisitions business, and who launched what is his first Internet business about two weeks ago.

Hangouts users say the feature offers a richness and intimacy unlike typical online interactions, and a kind of culture and community is already emerging. They say it is not unusual to spend as long as 12 hours on a Hangout.

Resnick, a 32-year-old Los Angeles designer for a digital media and e-commerce consulting company, co-founded Stutter Social on Google+ about four months ago, a volunteer organization for himself and others who stutter. Members login from around the world and practice their speech on a video Hangout.

"A huge part of being someone who stutters is that every time we open our mouths to speak, there is anxiety," Resnick said. "We really need to practice, looking at each other and speaking, in a safe environment."

The fast-growing stutterers group recently added a fourth weekly Hangout, and now has members from about 10 countries, including India, New Zealand and Croatia. Its power is palpable when a new member who has never spoken to another person who stutters logs in, perhaps from a more remote part of the world where speech therapists are unavailable or unknown, and realizes for the first time they are not alone.

"There's a kind of empathetic resonance that you get in a support group," Resnick said. "It's hard to put your finger on it, but only people who stutter really understand what it feels like."

Malone, 32, of Boulder, Colo., who uses the screen name M. Monica on Google+, has a similar experience. She has battled lupus and other painful health problems since she was 15, and treatment of the autoimmune disease has decimated her immune system, leaving her unable to go outside without risk of catching a serious infection.

But after being drawn to a serendipitous series of Hangout gatherings soon after Google+ launched in June, she now has more than 35,000 connections on the social network. Two years ago, she passed her days alone reading or watching DVDs. Now she is working with a friend in Italy on a service based on Hangouts that would offer emotional support for people hospitalized with serious health problems.

"I think nobody understands what this is to the disabled community," she said over a recent Hangout. "This isn't a tool. This is a lifeline."

Trust between people is hard to win and easy to lose online because most digital connections lack the nonverbal cues of facial expressions and gestures that are a big part of human communication, said Michael Fauscette, an analyst with research firm IDC.

But Hangouts are "much more interactive and rich because of the fact you have that video experience added to it," Fauscette said. "Some of the best business inventions have been accidental. That is probably the case with this."

Google has been surprised by the strong reaction to the feature, and has begun promoting it through celebrity Hangouts ranging from the Dalai Lama to soccer star David Beckham. The company is working to allow developers to build business apps for Hangouts, and thinks the possibilities for games are particularly strong.

"We didn't design it with the user cases we're seeing," said Bradley Horowitz, one of Google's top social networking executives. "Until we released this thing in the wild, I don't think we realized how special this was."

Google won't say how many people are using Hangouts, but Horowitz said the share of Google+ users discovering it is growing.

Frazer, an outgoing nuclear medical technician who lives near Tacoma, Wash., and Hartung, a quiet Army veteran and self-described technology geek who lives in Denver, might not be a couple but for the feature.

They met in November when they both joined a comment thread on Google+, and she gradually persuaded him to join a Hangout with a group of other people she chats with frequently.

"It takes a little pressure off when you can do a group chat, because it's not just you and a particular person," said Frazer, speaking over a Hangout from her home, with Hartung, on a visit from Denver, lying on the bed beside her. "That was the icebreaker, sort of, for us to meet one another."

"That was the only way I was gonna do it, as long as it wasn't one on one. I'm pretty shy, so ..."?, " Hartung said with a quiet smile. "But eventually, we made it one on one."

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