



Next NASA mission: Twitter and Facebook

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MOUNTAIN VIEW, Calif.--NASA astronauts "twittering" from the moon?

It's not such a far-fetched idea, considering the space agency's current push to partner with Web 2.0 companies like [Twitter](#) and save itself from turning into a dinosaur in the Internet age. Some executives at the [struggling NASA](#) believe that if the agency can adopt Web technologies like Twitter--a social network for broadcasting thoughts online or via text message--then kids and the general public will be more connected to space exploration and inspired to learn about science.

"How can NASA become hip?" NASA CoLab Project Manager Robert Schingler asked here Tuesday at NASA's Ames Research Center. "For me, it's allowing other individuals (and companies) to participate in the program."

CoLab, NASA's Collaborative Space Exploration Laboratory, hosted a one-day tech event called the Participatory Exploration Summit, which brought together representatives from across the space agency, as well as from Twitter, Creative Commons and game companies like Virtual Heroes and Virtue Arts.

CoLab's sole purpose is to foster partnerships between the space program and tech entrepreneurs, and then develop novel applications and make use of NASA resources. To that end, it plans to open offices in San Francisco, and it's already plotted virtual space in the virtual world *Second Life*.

We need developers to put some type of space element in all kinds of games, not shooter games."

--Beth Beck, NASA's Outreach Program

But CoLab has a tough [challenge](#) in infusing the young, fast-paced culture of Internet technology into a government agency that's largely slow, methodical and dominated by older scientists. Hobbled by spending cuts, NASA has increasingly turned to private industry to meet various goals for long-term space exploration, including returning to the moon in 10 years.

Now NASA is trying to reach out to the technology industry to help market itself to a generation of kids growing up online and who seem less inclined to study science or math.

According to open discussions Tuesday, NASA marketing efforts could come in the form of blogs, online videos and 3D games that simulate landing on the moon. When a NASA moderator asked the room whether people would like a stream of twitters from astronauts in space, a good portion of the small crowd raised its hand.

"We need more public support," said Andrew Hoppin, NASA CoLab Communities manager. "As a technical-driven agency, NASA should be pushing the envelope. That's the goal here today."

Still, there are some minor signs that NASA is catching up with the times. Hoppin said the agency is building a social network for space alumni, for example, so that former astronauts like Buzz Aldrin can connect with peers online.

NASA scientists and employees are apparently already big fans of the social network [Facebook, which is growing at a fast clip](#). There are more than 500 groups on Facebook that are associated with NASA, but not officially, Hoppin said. "It's one of the most potent platforms for social networking," he said.

The agency has also launched several [blogs](#) to communicate about internal projects both between groups and with the public. NASA Deputy Administrator Shana Dale [started blogging](#) this summer, for example. And although blogs have been popular for years, the fact that NASA officials are adopting the tools is a breakthrough for generating internal awareness for projects, Hoppin said.

Similarly, NASA's CoLab is investigating an internal, collaborative use of Twitter to share more information among agency officials. It already uses a secure, internal instant-messaging system from Jabber, but the agency still largely relies on e-mail and the phone for communications, according to officials at the event.

Also, NASA plans to launch [CosmosCode](#) later this summer, said Jessy Cowan-Sharp, who's in charge of the project. CosmosCode will be like a SourceForge for space software, she said, allowing third parties to contribute open-source code to NASA projects and share know-how with its scientists.

A big part of the agency's sales pitch to third-party partners is access to enormous sets of data from various sources, including the Hubble Space Station and the [James Webb Space Telescope](#), which resides a million miles from Earth. Google, for example, has teamed with NASA, which provides it data from Mars for the Google Earth mapping tool.

Game companies like Virtual Heroes and Virtue Arts have also used NASA data to create 3D simulations for space games. Virtue Arts has developed Lunar Exploration, a moon race game it plans to launch for the Xbox this winter.

And although NASA's mission to travel back to the moon is 10 years out, it has grand ambitions for these types of partnerships: According to NASA's pitch, "Imagine: As the first controlled lander to the moon in 40 years comes to rest on the lunar surface, millions of citizens participate in the descent through an interactive high-def video link. Millions more have already flown a simulated descent on the wildly popular lunar exploration game developed privately and distributed free on Nasa.gov."

[Mike Linksvayer](#), chief technology officer of the nonprofit Creative Commons, suggested that scientists and other planetary societies use its alternative license for copyrights to disseminate photos and other works so that more of the public has access to it. People can access NASA photos and videos that are posted to the Web because all government works are in the public domain.

"I encourage NASA to open up its data via APIs so that it can be used in mashups," Linksvayer said.

That move could garner more interest by developers to produce games that would get kids interested in space exploration, officials said.

"We need developers to put some type of space element in all kinds of games, not shooter games," said Beth Beck, NASA's Outreach Program Manager Space Operations. "We have to get those kids who are young to really care about what we do, because we tend to make it boring."

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