What Is Pinterest? A Database of Intentions

Evan Sharp, one of the co-founders of Pinterest, delves into what the wildly popular image-collecting site is really about, and what it's likely to do in the future.

By Alexis C. Madrigal

- **The questions (1-6) in this interview have been removed and placed below. Match the correct question with Evan Sharp's answers.**
  a. How much do you think the design of the interface has defined what Pinterest does?
  b. So, how do you see yourself opening up the social potential of Pinterest?
  c. You were once the only service that actually worked to let us save images from across the web. What did you think Pinterest was then?
  d. How would you compare yourself to Facebook?
  e. How do you think about what Pinterest is? How do you define it now?
  f. So when did you know that you had something bigger than a bookmarking site?

[1] _____

Today, I define it as a place where people can go to get ideas for any project or interest in their life. And as you encounter great ideas and discover new things that you didn't even know were out there, you can pin them and make them part of your life through our system of boards.

Best of all, as you're creating a board on Pinterest, other people can get inspiration from your ideas, so there's this cycle where what you're creating for yourself also helps other people make their lives.

I think of it as a kind of utility. People use it to save and organize things for later. And then it turns out that integral to saving things is discovering new things.

[2] _____

I didn't have grand plans. I don't think Ben did either in the beginning. It was just the tool I used in my job. I was in school for architecture and when you're in school for a creative discipline, so much of what you produce comes out of inspiration from other people.

The more you're exposed to architecturally, the better you can develop your own language out of that history of architectural thought.

So, I had thousands of images that I had saved in folders on my computer. But they were all named like databasestrings.jpg and I had no idea what any of them were. So Pinterest was a way for me to create a link: let's bookmark an image so that when I go look at it later, I go to where it came from. This is this architect's building. This is what it is. And collections are a natural way of organizing that sort of inspiration.

So for me, it was very much a professional tool in my industry. For Ben, it was slightly different. Ben used it in ways that you see the broader cross-section of people using it. He used it for recipe ideas, products he was in love with, planning travel. He had a kid. He got married. He did all those things on Pinterest.

[3] _____

You build something and it's like, what can I build on top of that and what can I build on top of that and what can I build on top of that. Great companies, I think, are the ones that see what they've built and can build on top of it and iterate their product.

I don't remember exactly when we were like "Holy crap! Pins aren't just images. They are representations of things and we can make them rich and we can make them canonical and link back to the best source and we can attribute this properly to the creator." (Which is a huge problem that I'm personally interested in.)

I would say we saw that pretty early on, but we're still pretty early on in executing against that the vision of making Pinterest the largest inventory of the world's objects.

What's cool is that because every object was put there by a person. It's not the largest inventory in the way that maybe a nerd like me would get excited about. But everything that's on there, at least one human found interesting, so there is a very good chance that at least one other human is going to find that interesting. So, it's a good set of objects. It's the world's largest set of objects that people care about.

One thing I've always loved about the Pinterest interface is that when you hit the button to pin something, it breaks the page down into its parts.

[4]

My background industry is design — I code a lot, too — but there's been this narrative of design in technology becoming more prominent. What the UI enables on Pinterest is this human activity that ends up creating a great database. And it's that knitting of front-end and back-end abilities that will power our products. We're not going to be exclusively the best engineering company — though we have some the best engineers — and we're not going to be the world's prettiest, best designed company. What's interesting is how those things interact, over and over, and back and forth. That's where the magic comes out. That's where the best new products are coming out on the Internet.

[5]

I used to work at Facebook. And fundamentally, Pinterest is about inspiration. And inspiration is a word that doesn't resonate with people until they use Pinterest and get what that means, but that's fundamentally about connecting to other people. Other people end up being people's source of inspiration, which also happens on Facebook. So, we're like Google in the data model way, but we're like Facebook in the more experiential way. The way you discover is a combination of the two.

[6]

Zuck describes Facebook in the press, I might butcher his words, but he's like people have a psychological need to spend time and know about and learn about the people they care about. It's built into our brains and its Facebook's job to remove as much effort as possible from that, so you can fulfill it any time you want to. Pinterest is not about your friends, it's about yourself. It's about the things you want in your life, the possibilities. What can my kid's first birthday party look like? It's very future-looking in a way that Twitter and Facebook are very right now or backwards looking.

Pinterest is about connecting you with people who manifest one thing you want your life to be like. So, if you are getting into photography, what do you do? You read photography blogs because these guys or girls are really into photography. They love their photos. They're talking about how to do it. People develop taste through other people, whether that's celebrities or people they know. And we have the data to understand — in a very non-creepy way, honestly — who are the people on Pinterest that manifest and express the things you look like you're interested in.

That's why Pinterest doesn't just show an image. It's an image with a person. That was a very deliberate decision. Everything on Pinterest was put there by a human being and — in aggregate — we can figure out who are the human beings who are the enthusiasts in the thing that really interests you. And those are the people who can guide your journey in that interest or project you're planning.

People are fundamental not just for our data model, but because eventually, we'll be able to connect you the people who really share your taste and express who you want to be. And that's something that's happened for decades in magazines and on blogs and on TV.

- **Which of the following statements are true?**
    1. Great companies copy what other companies do.
       True   False
    2. Ben used Pinterest like an architect.
       True   False
    3. Pinterest is built on the interests of individual people.
       True   False
    4. Sharp originally created Pinterest to organize his stored images.
       True   False
    5. Pinterest is different from Facebook because it's not based on the people you care about.
       True   False
    6. Pinterest is more similar to Facebook than Google.
       True   False
    7. Pinterest is similar to Facebook because people get ideas from one another.
       True   False
    8. Pinterest, Twitter and Facebook are always looking towards the future.
       True   False
    9. Pinterest knows people with similar interests to you.
       True   False

- In your own words, define the following words from the text:
   1. Grand:

   _____
   _____
   _____

   2. Discipline:

   _____
   _____
   _____

   3. Cross-section:

   _____
   _____
   _____

   4. Inventory:

   _____
   _____
   _____

   5. Interact:

   _____
   _____
   _____

   6. Fundamentally:

   _____
   _____
   _____