The Google+ Guide

Circles, Photos, Hangouts, and More

Scott McNulty

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Peachpit Press

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To Marisa, for making sure I don't do all my socializing via the Internet.

About the Author

Scott McNulty has been known to Google himself from time to time. He is also an unabashed early adopter and technology enthusiast, with an undeniable urge to share his excitement about technology with the world.

Scott lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Marisa. By day he works at the The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, and by night he blogs about whatever strikes his fancy at http://blog.blankbaby.com. He has also been known to tweet once or twice under the handle @blankbaby.

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This book was a team effort; any errors in the text, however, are mine alone.

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Introduction

Google+ is the newest kid on the social-networking block—a service that allows you to post your thoughts, photos, videos, and more to your stream (see Chapter 1). People who follow you on Google+ can see what you've posted on your stream and share it with their followers.

Now, you may be thinking, "I thought we had enough social networks to keep up with already: Twitter, Facebook, even MySpace. Why add another?" That's a very good question, and I'm sure that many smart people at Google asked the same question before they launched Google+. How can I be so sure? Because it all that careful thought shows when you're using Google+.

What Google+ Offers

Google+ offers a bevy of features that allow you to share different things with different people. That final bit is the interesting part: Google+ makes it downright simple to share particular things with only certain people.

I clearly remember the day when Facebook changed for me forever: A friend request from my mother appeared in my inbox. Now, I love my mother, and I couldn't refuse to be her friend (that might have resulted in some awkward Thanksgiving meals), but when your mom is your friend on Facebook, that fact affects the way you use the service. The same can be said when your boss and co-workers friend you on Facebook.

Facebook is invested in your sharing things with the widest audience possible, as the default privacy settings reflect. Lately, Facebook has gotten better about allowing you to choose who can see what, but Google+ was designed with choice in mind. Google+ is the first social network to embrace the idea that people have several groups of people in their lives: relatives, friends, co-workers, the Tuesday-night poker group, and so on. The list is incredibly different from person to person. Isn't it odd, then, that most social networks assume that you want to share the same things across all those groups? Google+ doesn't.

In the following sections, I take a quick look at the features this book covers to give you an idea of what Google+ has to offer.

Circles

The cornerstone of your Google+ experience is circles, which group people in your Google+ network. You can share whatever you post to Google+ with any number of your circles, and you can create your own custom circles.

Google+ also has some default circles:

- Friends
- Family
- Acquaintances
- Following

I dive into circles in Chapter 2.

Hangouts

Google+ makes sharing things with other folks on Google+ easy. It makes talking to them very easy as well. You can start a video conference call, or hangout, by clicking a button. Better yet, you can invite people from any of your circles to join you in your hangout. If you aren't into the idea of video/audio conferencing, hangouts also support group chat so that you can type your thoughts.

Hangouts, and some uses for them, are covered in Chapter 4.

Messenger

The builders of any new social network would be crazy to ignore the explosive growth of mobile devices, so Google+ has a couple of features that are designed to be used only with mobile devices. Messenger, the most prominent of the mobile-only features, is a text-messaging service of sorts—without the fees.

You can message with anyone in your circles. As long as both you and your contact have the Google+ app on your devices (iOS or Android), you can send text and pictures to each other.

I cover this feature in Chapter 7.

Pictures

Google+ allows you to share that funny cat picture you found on the Internet. It's also become something of a go-to service where photographers can show off their work to their peers and get feedback, thanks to Google+'s robust commenting and 1+ system (the Google+ analogue to Facebook's Like).

You can not only share individual pictures, but also create entire albums of photos and share them with any and all of your circles. Only the people with whom you've shared the photos can comment on them.

Creating, sharing, and managing photo albums on Google+ are covered in Chapter 5.

The rest

The preceding four features would make a pretty good social network all by themselves, but Google didn't stop there. Here are some more features that aren't integral to the Google+ experience at the moment but that have growth potential:

- **Search.** Search is fully baked into Google+, allowing you to search for people, posts, sparks, or other interesting things to post. Chapter 6 is all about search.
- **Location.** In addition to sharing video, text, images, or links with people on Google+, you can share your physical location. See Chapter 3 for details.
- **Instant Upload.** If you have an Android device running Android 2.1 or later, and you install the Google+ app, you can take advantage of Instant Upload. After this feature is set up, all the images you take on your Android device are uploaded to Google+ but kept in a private album until you decide to share them. I cover the ins and outs of Instant Upload in Chapter 5.
- **Games.** Yes, you can play Angry Birds in Google+. What more do you need to know? Chapter 8 covers accessing games and sharing scores (and also tells you why Google+ games aren't as annoying as Facebook games).

Updates for This Book

One of the most challenging things about being a tech-book author is the rapid pace of technological change. I type as fast as my fingers let me, yet the technology changes even faster. Google+ is a prime example. Google, the company, thinks of Google+ as a project, and it's actively developing this project, adding tweaks, changes, and new features at a pretty steady rate.

With all these unknown future features, won't this book become out of date? No, because when you buy it, you aren't buying just the book: You're also buying four updates that cover whatever big features Google adds to Google+.

Because I don't have access to Google's internal plans for rolling out features, it's impossible to predict when the updates will be available. Make sure that you register your copy of this book at www.peachpit.com/googleplusguide to get your free updates.

One of the biggest features missing at the moment, for example, is business profiles. Google+ is all about individual users, but lots of companies are very eager to hold "conversations" with consumers who use Google+. (In other words, they want to use Google+ to sell you things. Commerce isn't always bad, though.) Shortly after Google adds this feature to Google+, Peachpit Press will provide an update to this book that explains how to use business profiles. Neat, huh?

4

Hangouts

Google+ attempts to replicate your real-life social networks with circles. But how can it replicate one of the best aspects of having friends—impromptu hanging out—on the Internet? Google+ has a feature that tries to do just that, cleverly named hangouts.

Hangouts are basically videoconferences that you can start from Google+. Invite people or circles, and folks can join your hangout and shoot the breeze. You can even watch YouTube videos together!

The Lowdown on Hangouts

A few things to know about hangouts:

- Hangouts require the Google voice and video plug-in to work. Download it here: www.google.com/chat/video.
- Each hangout can have a maximum ten participants.
- At 90 minutes, Google+ checks in to make sure that your hangout is still happening. If no one responds, the hangout ends automatically.
- Your computer must have a webcam and a microphone attached to it to audio/video chat.

Now that the ground rules of hangouts have ben established, the rest of this chapter is devoted to showing you how to start and join hangouts for yourself.

Google+ recently added hangouts with extras. These hangouts offer different features and will be covered in one of the digital updates to this book (see the introduction).

Starting a Hangout

Starting a hangout is very simple:

1. Log in to Google+.
2. Click the green Start a Hangout button in the third column of your stream page (**Figure 4.1**).
3. If you don't have the Google voice and video plug-in installed, you'll be prompted to install it (**Figure 4.2**); click the Install Plugin button, and follow the onscreen instructions.

After you install the plug-in, you may have to click Start a Hangout again to restart your hangout.

Clicking the Start a Hangout button with the plug-in installed opens the Google Hangouts window (**Figure 4.3**). In the middle of the screen is video from your computer's webcam. As the screen suggests, take this opportunity to make sure that your face can be seen and that your hair is in order.

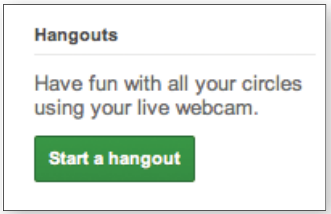

Figure 4.1 (above) The Start a Hangout button.

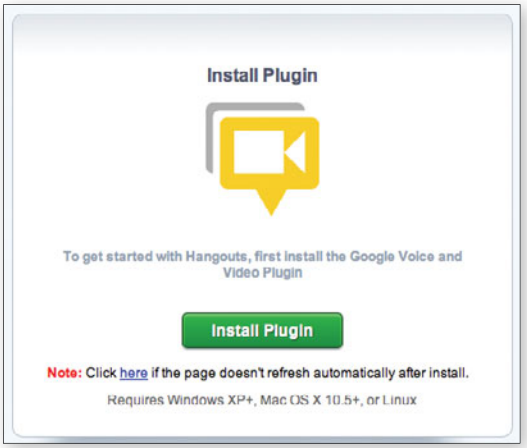

Figure 4.2 (right) Hangouts require the Google voice and video plug-in. If you don't have it installed, you'll see this prompt.

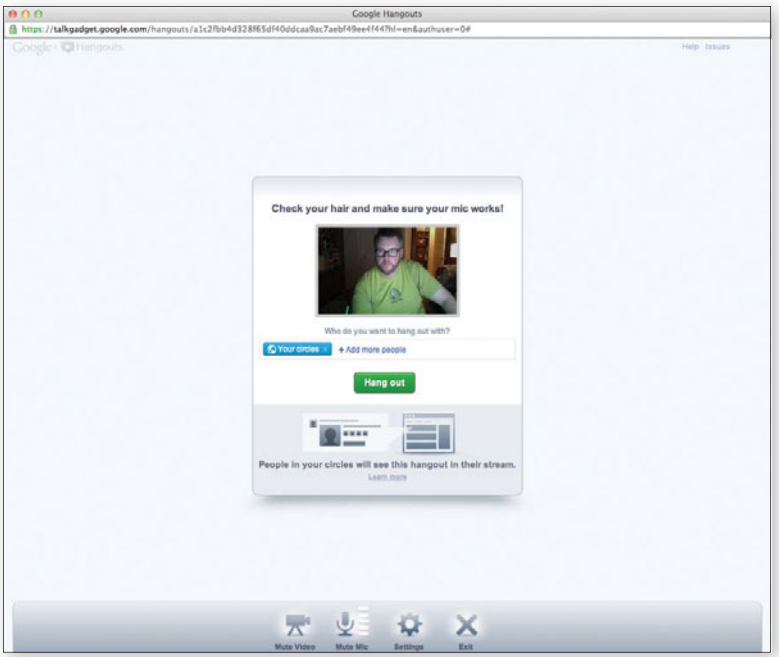

Figure 4.3 Before you start a hangout, you have a chance to make sure that your video and audio are OK.

4. Familiarize yourself with the buttons along the bottom of the window (**Figure 4.4** on the next page):
    - **Mute Video.** This button mutes your video for the rest of the hangout participants.

- **Mute Mic.** The Mute Mic button serves double duty. Click it, and your microphone is muted so that no one can hear what you're saying. When your mic isn't muted, though, your sound level is displayed. The more green bars appear, the louder you are. If no green bars appear, make sure that the Google Hangouts window is using the correct source for your mic (see "Adjusting hangout settings" later in this chapter).
- **Settings.** As you might expect, click this button to see your hangout's settings.
- **Exit.** End your hangout by clicking this button.

Figure 4.4 These four buttons appear before participants join your hangout (and afterward as well).

5. To start your hangout, invite some people to hang out with you.

   You can select some of your circles or individual people. By default, Your Circles is selected (refer to Figure 4.3), which means that anyone who is in one of your circles will be able to join this hangout.

6. Click the green Hang Out button.

   Your hangout is posted to your stream and the streams of the people you invited (**Figure 4.5**). Anyone who wants to hang out with you just clicks the Join This Hangout button.

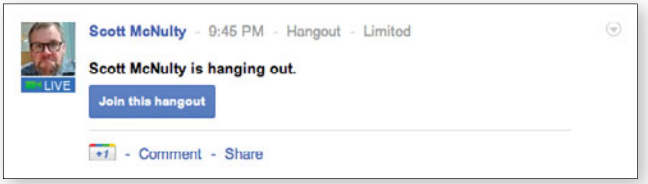

Figure 4.5 A notice of your hangout is posted to the stream to alert the people you invited to join you.

You can participate in only one hangout at a time per computer.

Hanging Out

Your hangout is started, and chances are that no one has joined you just yet, so the hangout window displays only your webcam video and the image of a sad, lonely robot to really drive home the point that you're alone (**Figure 4.6**). (Thanks, Google+!)

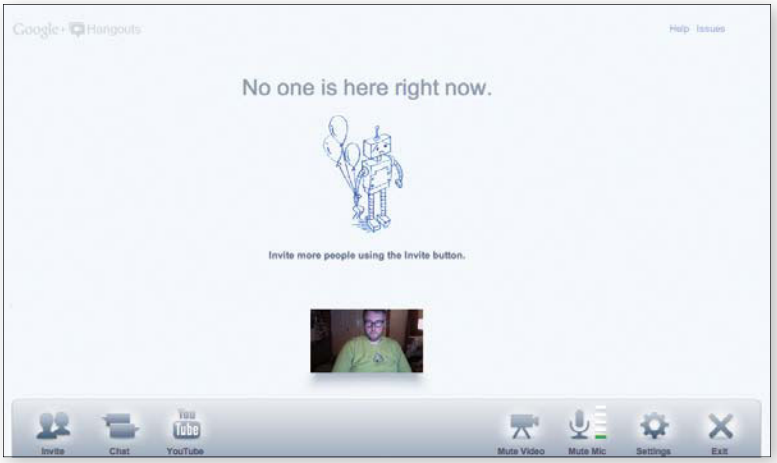

Figure 4.6 The sad robot reminds you that you're all alone in your hangout.

When people start joining your hangout, however, their video feeds are displayed in a line toward the bottom of the window (**Figure 4.7**). The main video window displays the participant who's sending the most noise through his or her microphone at the moment.

Figure 4.7 Hanging out with some friends. Participants are shown at the bottom, and whoever is talking is shown in the center.

You can override this automatic switching for yourself simply by clicking the person whose video feed you want to appear in the main area. That video thumbnail is outlined in green, and that person's video is displayed in the center. Clicking someone else puts him or her in the center. Click a person twice to revert to automatic switching.

Using hangout options

While you're in an active hangout, whether it has ten people in it or one, three new buttons appear at the bottom of the screen (**Figure 4.8**):

- **Invite.** You may want to invite more people to your hangout to get the party started. Click the Invite button, and you can invite more people/circles to your hangout just by clicking the Add Circles or People to Share With link and selecting them (**Figure 4.9**). Click the Invite button, and your hangout adds the new invitees.

Figure 4.8 These buttons appear when people join you in your hangout.

Keep in mind that everyone in the hangout—not just the person who started the hangout—can invite people to join in.

- **Chat.** In addition to having audio chat, you can click this button to open a text chat (**Figure 4.10**). The chat is also used to record when people join or leave your hangout.

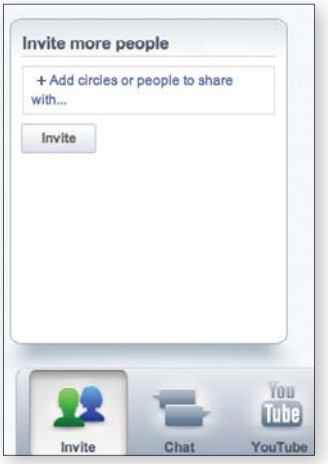

Figure 4.9 Invite people to a hangout by clicking the Invite button.

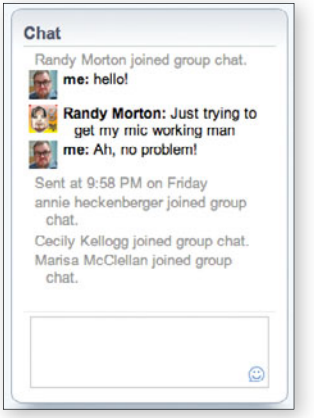

Figure 4.10 Hangout chat works like any other chat you've ever used. Hangout alerts, such as people joining and leaving, are also displayed here.

- **YouTube.** Anyone in the hangout can click the YouTube button to bring up YouTube search. Find a video you want to watch, and click Play (**Figure 4.11**). The rest of the people in the hangout get an alert telling them that you're watching a YouTube video and asking whether they want to join in (**Figure 4.12**).

  When you join in on watching a YouTube video, your microphone is automatically muted so that people can hear the video. If you want to talk, click the green Push to Talk button (refer to Figure 4.11), and everyone will hear what you have to say. This is a great way to pretend that you're on *Mystery Science Theater 3000* with your friends from across the country.

  If at any point you want to stop watching YouTube videos, just click the YouTube button again, and you return to the normal hangout interface.

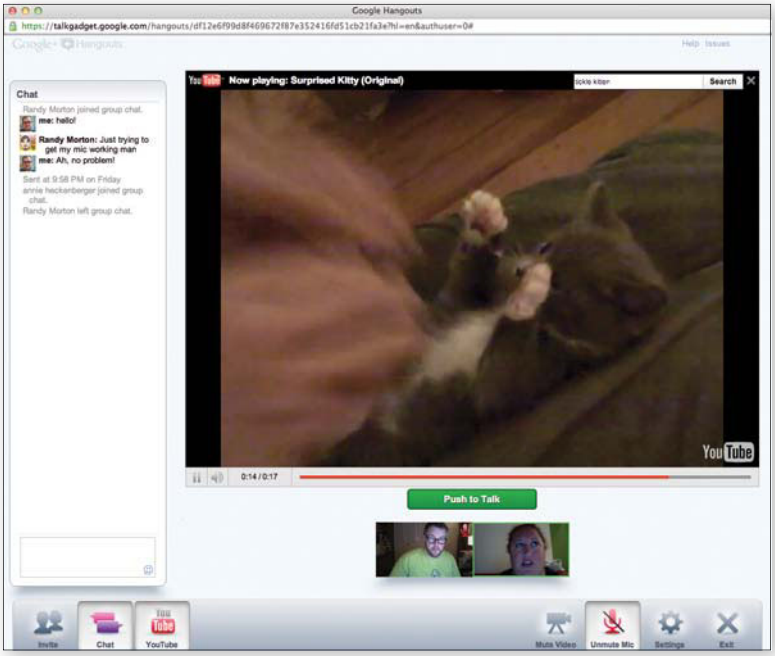

Figure 4.11 Everyone in a hangout can watch the same YouTube video.

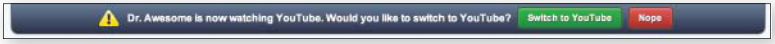

Figure 4.12 When someone starts to watch a YouTube video in a hangout, the rest of the participants are alerted so that they can join in (or not).

As you're hanging out, you can mute the other participates, though only at your end. Hover your mouse over a person's video, and some icons appear (**Figure 4.13** on the next page). If you click the green mic/volume-control icon, that person's audio is muted for you.

The red hand icon is for flagging inappropriate behavior in your hangout. Clicking it brings up the Report Abuse screen (**Figure 4.14**). You can pick a reason from the list, and you can even upload a screen shot of the issue (if you took one) to further your case. Click the green Report Abuse button when you're ready, or click Cancel if you clicked the icon by accident.

Figure 4.13 (above) Hovering over someone's video allows you to mute that person or report abusive behavior.

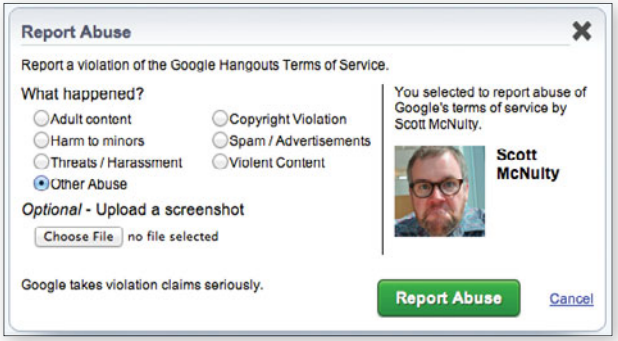

Figure 4.14 (above right) Choose the reason why you're reporting someone for abuse. You can even include a screen shot. (Just so you know, I didn't do any of those things.)

Adjusting hangout settings

At any time during a hangout, you can click the Settings button to make several adjustments (**Figure 4.15**). The video from your camera is displayed on the right side of the Settings screen. Next to your video are a couple of things to help you troubleshoot your audio. At the top is a microphone level meter. Talk a bit, and if the level goes up and down, your microphone is working. To test your speakers, click the Play the Test Sound link. If you can hear the test tone, you'll be able to hear the other participants in the hangout.

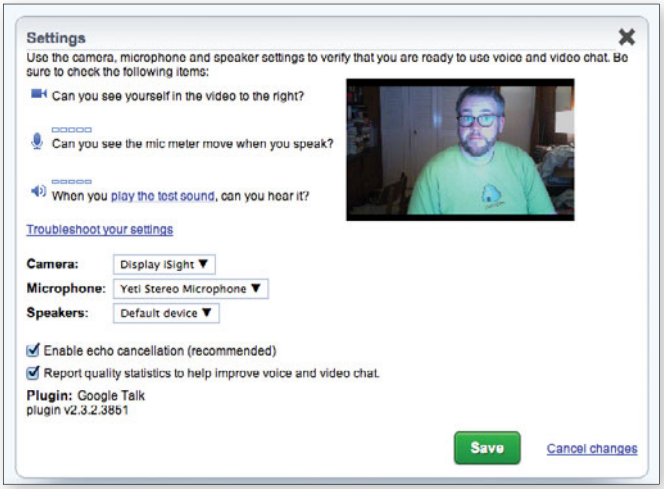

Figure 4.15 Hangout settings include choosing audio and video sources.

There are also three drop-down menus that let you adjust your camera, microphone, and speakers. If you have more than one microphone (such as a laptop with a USB microphone), all of them will be listed in the Microphone menu. Choose the one you want to use, or leave the menu set to Default Device, and the hangout will use whatever microphone you have your operating system set to use by default.

You can toggle two check boxes:

- **Enable Echo Cancellation.** This setting cancels any echoes that may crop up when you have a microphone close to speakers (the usual computer setup).
- **Report Quality Statistics.** The Google+ team is continually tweaking the way that hangouts encode video and audio to further enhance results. If you leave this box checked, you share statistics about the video/audio of your hangout with Google, and Google will use these statistics to make hangouts even better.

Click the green Save button to apply any changes you made in your settings.

Ending a hangout

Ending a hangout is simple: Just click the Exit button in the bottom-right corner of the hangout window. Anyone who joined the hangout can exit whenever he likes, and the hangout will continue. When the hangout owner (the person who started the hangout) clicks Exit, though, the hangout ends for all the participants.

When the hangout ends, the hangout post that appeared in the stream is updated to reflect that fact (**Figure 4.16**). All the people who were in the hangout are listed in the post as well, with links back to their profiles.

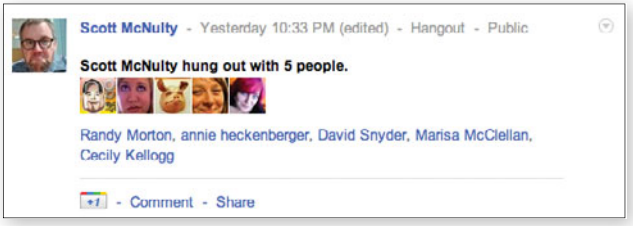

Figure 4.16 When your hangout ends, the hangout stream post is updated with a list of the participants.

Starting a Hangout from YouTube

You can watch YouTube videos with your friends in hangouts, which is cool. On the flip side, you can start a hangout directly from a YouTube video.

To start a hangout from a YouTube video, follow these steps:

1. Go to a YouTube video.

For this example, use http://youtu.be/ACNF-XaFfPA.

2. Click the Share button directly below the video.

In the resulting screen, you see the direct link to the video, an Embed button, and a couple of icons for posting this video to a variety of social networks. All the way to the right of the sharing section are the Hangout icon and a link that reads Start a Google+ Hangout (**Figure 4.17**).

Figure 4.17 Start a Google+ hangout right from a YouTube video by clicking this link.

3. Click the hangout link.

Now you're starting a hangout just like you would on Google+.

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