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Meta Culpa

Facebook's rebrand may have placed the company in a better position for what came after—even if the legless avatars never came to life.

BY CHRIS STOKEL-WALKER

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A new logo and name are unveiled in front of Facebook headquarters in 2021. Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

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The world was a very different place five years ago. We were living through COVID lockdowns, fearing for our lives. ChatGPT didn't exist, and talk of A.I. barely passed people's lips. Some things have stayed the same, though: People still make fun of Mark Zuckerberg.

They had even more reason than normal to do so on Oct. 28, 2021. That day, the Facebook Company announced a seemingly inauspicious rebranding to Meta, and its founder, Zuckerberg, was going all-in on the metaverse. "From now on, we will be metaverse-first, not Facebook-first," he wrote in a letter to the public. The metaverse was Facebook's vision of how we'd all interact in the future, and it looked a little bit like a cross between *The Sims* and the Wii Universe, if both had a major glitch that meant they couldn't render your legs.

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The rebrand was panned at the time. Like, a lot. But five years on, the much-mocked decision to rename the multibillion-dollar company after a technology that has never lived up to its promise might actually have been the *right* decision—albeit made for the wrong reason.

"The critics weren't wrong, but at the same time, I do think a rebrand was necessary," Avi Greengart, a technology analyst at Techsponential, told me. Facebook in 2021 was facing challenges: Whistleblower Frances Haugen leaked tens of thousands of internal documents known as the Facebook Files that revealed the company knowingly prioritized profits and engagement over user safety and children's mental health—raising difficult questions about how the company dealt with harmful content. It also wanted to go more into virtual reality with Oculus—something a world away from its other products like Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook. Katie Harbath, who spent a decade working at Facebook, including as its director of public policy for global elections before the rebrand, says staff increasingly had to explain whether they meant the app or the company when they talked about Facebook. "It was getting a little complicated internally," she told me.

The two issues combined well to give reason to a rebrand. Harbath doesn't think the timing of the change was down to the bad publicity created by Haugen, although she acknowledges it could have looked that way. Instead, she said that Facebook had simply become a bad way to describe the totality of what Zuckerberg wanted to do with the company. As Priya Raghubir, a marketing professor at New York University's Stern School of Business, told me, the company named after "a middle-aged, older person's platform" wasn't exactly going to be able to sell you on wearing Ray-Ban smart glasses.

Others aren't so sure the name change was meant for the likes of you and me, but was instead a statement of intent to investors. "I don't think it was meant for end users or consumers," David Nieborg, a professor who studies the platform economy at the University of Toronto, told me.

That's good, because the metaverse bit of Meta hasn't withstood the test of time. Meta's Reality Labs division, which is home to its VR and augmented-reality arms, recorded an operating loss of $12.8 billion in the first nine months of 2026. Turns out we didn't particularly like the idea of living in an immersive social world where we didn't have legs—even if the avatars did eventually get them.

Denise Lee Yohn, a brand leadership expert and author of *What Great Brands Do*, isn't persuaded the rebrand has mattered much at all. "I think the performance that we've seen by the company in the markets, as well as among users, really has nothing to do with the name," she told me. She reckons people keep using Meta's products even when they don't particularly like or trust the company.

Despite the name change, the company still operates largely like the old Facebook. In the third quarter of 2026, more than 99 percent of Meta's $64.6 billion in revenue still came from its family of apps, and mainly from advertising to its 3.64 billion daily users. They're not on the metaverse—in large part because it doesn't exist in the form it once did. In March, Meta announced it would remove its Horizon Worlds social platform from VR headsets entirely, focusing instead on people accessing its virtual worlds through their smartphones. It partially reversed the decision days later, keeping existing VR experiences running, but it highlighted how the company thought about its previous big bet on VR experiences.

Still, that rebrand for a failed technology helped out the company in other ways. People seem more likely to adopt its smart glasses made in collaboration with Ray-Ban because they're called Meta, rather than Facebook, specs. And the company has sold plenty of them: more than 7 million pairs of smart glasses in 2025. By the first half of 2026, Meta accounted for 94 percent of worldwide shipments of A.I. glasses without displays.

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The same is true for Meta Muse, its A.I. agent that was launched in September, reportedly gaining more than 3 million weekly users within weeks of its launch. Even subliminally, granting access to large parts of our digital lives may feel more doable to a company that feels more detached from issues like the Cambridge Analytica scandal, if only because they don't share the same name, even if they do share the history.

But there's also a bigger picture at play. "This really is still about trying to control a platform without controlling the OS," said Greengart. That's something Nieborg agreed with. Zuckerberg, the academic argues, has long wanted Facebook to be much bigger than a single social network. "They want to be utilities like your water company, like your electricity company, and Facebook wanted to be the operating system of your life," he said. Renaming the company Meta was an acknowledgement of what Zuckerberg had always wanted to build. It's also an acknowledgment that Meta didn't want to have to rely on other companies for access to its ecosystem. It relied

hugely on advertising that was brokered through third-party services such as Apple, and wanted to change that by broadening beyond social media to its own hardware and devices. When Apple tightened its privacy rules in 2021, it made it harder for Facebook to track users across apps, something Meta estimated cost it $10 billion in lost revenue in 2022.

Harbath thinks the rebrand has come to mark a genuine dividing line in the company's history. She still tells people she worked at Facebook, rather than Meta, partly because she's disagreed with some of Zuckerberg's decisions since she left the company. "My identity, I think, is just more tied to the Facebook brand than the Meta brand," she said. "I do think it is a new chapter." But beyond that, the name change has come to represent something more substantial than swapping one brand name for another. Five years later, Meta encompasses virtual reality, A.I. agents, smart glasses, or whatever technological revolution Zuckerberg decides to throw billions of dollars at next.

Given that, Meta fits better than Facebook did. But those who worked with Zuckerberg aren't sure it'll remain Meta forever. "I have wondered if Mark would try to rename it again," said Harbath. "I wouldn't put it past him."

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