

## Friendly giant? Some fear a growing Google

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Years ago, before Google grew into an Internet giant, about a dozen employees met to discuss the company's direction. An engineer in the group blurted out what became the informal motto: "Don't be evil."

The small search engine company started by two university students in California has since grown into a multinational, 20,000-employee behemoth. Still, it seems Google's tongue-in-cheek slogan has stuck in the public psyche. Even as the company grew, it remained Google the good.



"That has lingered. People have still embraced them," says Alan K'necht, founder of K'nechtology, a Toronto-area company which specializes in websites and search engine optimizing.

CREDIT: Nicholas Kamm  
GOOGEL.jpg

However, kinks have begun to appear in Google's friendly-giant image, most recently with the company's announcement this week of its upcoming Chrome operating system - which will give Google a tentacle in nearly every major aspect of the web experience, from OS, to search engine, to browser, to e-mail, to productivity software, to satellite mapping.

Certain Internet communities have begun to fear Google, says K'necht.

"There's now growing suspicion of Google. What are they doing with all this information they're capturing?" he says. "It's a question of what Google can do or has the potential to do."

Google has fostered its benevolent image, in part by offering its slew of services for free.

While companies such as Yahoo were making users pay for extra e-mail space, Google was giving away gigabytes with its e-mail service. While Microsoft was charging hundreds of dollars for word processing and spreadsheet software, Google offered similar programs for nothing.

"Google comes out with no expectations. You can't argue about Google when it's free. You like it, you like it, you don't like it, don't use it," says K'necht. People get the sense Google is looking out for them, he adds.

As Google fostered its positive image, Microsoft kept making headlines for all the wrong reasons, says K'necht. News stories about virus strikes and hostile takeovers dogged the company founded by Paul Allen and Bill Gates, who's given nearly \$30 billion to charity to date.

"It's not so much that we love Google, it's that we've learned to hate Microsoft," says K'necht.

Still, the free programs have come at a cost: embedded ads tailored to users based on the information they're inputting. Send an e-mail through Gmail about having a baby and it's more than likely an ad selling diapers will appear. Search for pet adoption sites through its search engine and pitches for nearby pet stores will pop up.

While K'necht says Google has done a good job of managing their paid ads, he speculates Chrome OS - which will be available for free - will contain embedded ads.

Those tailored ads could begin to weigh on users, who fear a Big Brother type corporation, says K'necht.

"People still have that fear and that could potentially turn on Google," he says. "Any time any corporation gains control of the user experience from top to bottom . . . there is a potential of Google having access to extraordinary amounts of personal information and user behaviour."

A Google spokeswoman who asked not to be named says trust is central to Google's business, and that Google "aggressively" protects its users' privacy.

"We don't hold user data hostage. Users can move the information in their Google Account to another service or delete it at any time," she says. "At Google, we only ask for the limited information that we need to provide you with the service you want. For example, we only ask for a username and password to create a Google Account because that's all we need for you to log in. We don't require a user's address, phone number, or billing information."

She says Google is interested in knowing what people are looking for, and not who they are. She also notes Google was the first major search engine to anonymize search information.

"The information we collect to do this is pretty boring, geeky stuff to many people, but it's what helps us make stuff work better," she said. "We think these benefits are on par with or outweigh the information that users share to receive them, but users that disagree are free to choose not to use Google."

No one can accuse Google of being secretive, says Rob Clark, senior analyst with Social Media Group, a southern Ontario company that helps businesses navigate the web.

"I don't know if people do trust the Google giant," he says. "I think people are somewhat uneasy about having a giant in their midst, but the giant keeps doing things that make their lives easier and every time the giant moves it explains where it's moving and why. The giant is always holding its hands out and showing that it has no malicious intent."

Clark says Chrome is going to be open source, which means anyone can look at the code running the program to see exactly what it is doing and why.

"I don't have to worry about secretive happenings occurring under the hood as I'll know that most of the world's developers will have taken a good look and pored over each and every line of code," he says. "If there is something that is malicious, ill-conceived or not right about the OS, you can bet the news of that would be on a dozen blogs faster than either of us could blink."

To fend off the perception Google is collecting data with ill intent, the company needs to be upfront about what kind of information it's gathering and how it's being used, says Clark, adding he's comfortable with using Google.

"I know that what's happening on Google's end is all being done by a machine.

There's no person holding a file with my name on it and deciding to serve up a particular AdSense ad. There isn't a Google employee sitting looking at my web history and saying 'oh, ho - so that's his favourite blogger.' It's just machines. It's all just ones and zeros flying around hard drives and motherboards in a server farm someplace," he says.

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