

Cosmetic Changes at Google Precede Larger Overhaul

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Google is undergoing some of the most sweeping changes in its short, seven year history. As of next week, Google will have finished sorting what might be its largest algorithm shift ever as the final points of the 3.5 part [Bourbon Update](#) were installed last Monday. This update has been staggered into three and a half sections in order to avoid a massive amount of dislocation in established rankings as was seen in previous major updates. While changes stemming from the Bourbon Update have not actually manifested into a full reordering of Google's search engine results pages (SERPs), many individual webmasters have reported fairly significant losses or gains in ranking over the past few days.

There are dozens of factors behind changes at Google but the greatest is the enormous valuation of the company itself. With share prices nearing the \$300 mark and current market capitalization topping \$80billion, Google is considered the most valuable media company in the world, surpassing the \$78billion value of Time-Warner and rising far above Yahoo's estimated value of \$56billion. Most of Google's riches are newly found, having been generated after their August 2004 IPO. In their race to outlast, outperform and outsmart their competitors, Google has changed its PR strategy and its appearance to suit the legions of suits swirling in and out of their Mountain View offices.

While money may move mountains, it takes a community to change an institution. The search environment has changed substantially over the past three years and in that time, every major player in the search sector has changed as well. Today, Google has become a lot more complicated, so much so that it has stopped trying to look simple. This change in corporate attitude is best reflected in two places, the homepage and the About Google section.

Google's homepage used to be quite simple. Recently, Google created a personalized portal interface [google.com/ig](#) offering users instant access to several of these new features. For folks with Google accounts such as Gmail users, subscribers to Google Groups, Google desktop users and other account holders, personalized versions of the once sparse homepage now presents instant entry points to the various applications the individual uses. Many industry observers have suggested Google's adoption of so many new features and an all-in-one interface show they are moving towards presenting themselves as more of a portal like Yahoo or MSN. Google has always been a bit different than its competition. Even when borrowing and innovating on competitors' ideas, Google has, until now at least, managed to keep itself at an arm's length from the mainstream in appearance and operation. The maintenance of that image gave Internet users an alternative view of Google, one that propelled Google to a position of almost total dominance of the search engine sector. While that dominance might have slipped over the past year, Google is still the most popular search appliance in the world.

One of the ways Google has acted differently than others is in the appearance of not taking itself too seriously. Its corporate ethics policy was limited to the three word phrase, "Don't be evil". Its front page interface retains the double-entendre induced "I feel lucky" button, even though the button is rarely used. The prospectus issued during their August 2004 IPO was specifically written to appear idealistically anti-corporate. Since its introduction, Google has practiced projecting a simple, youthful image that

required very little in the way of explanation, so long as their search engine lived up to users' expectations.

Google strives to live up to user expectations and, for the most part, has met and exceeded them time and time again. There is one long-held expectation that Google may not be able to live up to any longer though. Many of us assume Google's relatively informal public attitude will continue to carry over into the later part of the decade. It won't. By comparison, Google will almost certainly continue to be perceived as the search engine driven by youthful energy. Whenever competitors such as MSN or Yahoo try to appear as down-to-Earth as Google does, their efforts seem obvious and forced. Does anyone remember that poor-fellow in the butterfly suit wandering aimlessly around New York last year? Google's communication style is maturing and the best place to view these changes is on the About Google section of their site.

Google has published information about itself on pages found behind the "[About Google](#)" link for several years. While documents found in the About section have never been totally static, a facelift over the past few weeks has radically altered the look and feel of the section. Along with the traditional organic search engine results and highly targeted paid-ads, Google is actually a series of 30-someodd search-based applications ranging from alerts and answers to wireless search and weather information. Driven in part by an inventive entrepreneurial spirit and in part by a desire to keep up with products offered by competitors, Google has been rapidly adding new features and tools to their core search service for the past three years.

Google's About Google page was once much smaller than it is today. It has grown slightly larger every time Google adds another offering to it. The biggest changes are found behind the increasing number of links on the About page. Today's version of the About page has five boxes added to the left hand side of the page advertising [Google Desktop](#), [Blogger](#), [Google Code](#), [Google Mobile](#), and [My Search History](#). In the center column, Google continues to show four main site sections labeled, Our Search, For Site Owners, Our Company, and More Google. Collectively, those sections contain a larger number of links than they did previously and the number of documents found behind those links has grown as well. Serious Google users should take an hour or two to tour these changes and learn more about the staggering range of features, services and search-enhancements Google now offers.

For webmasters and SEOs, an examination of the new Google Webmaster Guidelines is a definite must. Google has recently changed its webmaster guidelines which are also considered to be a primer on "ethical SEO" practices in relation to Google placements. Google has recently updated its webmaster guidelines to include information on "supplemental listings", crawling frequencies and prefetching. Google has also posted information on its new [Google Sitemaps](#) experiment.

Google Sitemaps is perhaps the most important new feature for SEOs offered by Google in a long time. Said to be an experiment in spidering, Google Sitemaps invites webmasters to feed site data directly to Google through an XML sitemap page. Webmasters and SEOs can now tell Google exactly which sections of their sites to crawl, and providing they are keeping their XML sitemap current, when and where to look for changes to their sites. This experimental initiative will especially help webmasters working with database driven sites or large Ecommerce sites where documents are subject to frequent change and are often found behind long-string URLs. Google has been kind enough to provide detailed information on establishing an XML feed and setting priorities for Googlebot.

As it grows, Google appears to be running into the same problem other webmasters with numerous sites or services encounter, the rapid dilution of a domain's unique topic focus. In order to keep themselves accessible, understandable and relevant, Google's teams of engineers, programmers and public relations



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specialists are involved in what appears to be a massive overhaul of the interface, public documents and the basic sorting algorithm that produces organic results. As in previous years, how this all plays out in the end is entirely up to the searching public. From the SEO/SEM perspective, it is a good thing Google is in the midst of this update. Web workers have been demanding a greater degree of transparency from Google for some time now and perhaps these updates are the beginning of a new commitment to communication from the Googleplex.

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