

Goofy Goings on at Google

By Jim Hedger, StepForth News Editor, [StepForth Placement Inc.](#)

Google can be seen as one of the great magic-mirrors of the Internet, reflecting vast sections of content back to its users based on their immediate interests as stated through their searches. The existence of magic makes for an interesting and often spiritually laced discussion that is best held outside the realm of business. A mirror, on the other hand, is a physical object that, at least once in its existence, was treated as a commodity. If you break it, you've bought it, and we all know the mystical fate that befalls those unfortunate enough to break mirrors.

This is what makes Google's recent behaviour so mystifying. Why would one of the world's most important companies, which enjoyed one of the best corporate reputations ever established, take such serious risks with its credibility? Is Google, as a mirror, cracked, or is the gild simply wearing off the back leaving a barren transparency of well-cut glass?

Google has attracted a lot of attention over the past six years, the vast majority of it being positive endorsements of Google's extraordinary search capabilities and the simple elegance of the AdWords/AdSense contextual delivery system. For the past two weeks however Google has received scant praise and a great deal of criticism, some of which is seeping out of the Net and into the real world. Two issues have dominated and a third is brewing in the background. Webmasters inherently dislike the auto-links feature included in Google's new toolbar. This anger might account for a lack of comment from webmasters on a recent [article](#) in which investment analysts publicly speculate Google is a risky one trick pony. To top off a bunch of bad press, the SEM analyst community over at [ThreadWatch](#) has caught Google using SEO tactics that violate its own Webmaster Guidelines, the document many base "SEO Ethics" on.

Trust and the Art of Alteration

Google operates the world's most popular search engine that is used more often by more people than either of its major rivals, Yahoo or MSN. Hundreds of millions of people type Google's URL every day when seeking products or information on the Internet. Its users have come to expect fast and relevant results and are apt to trust Google to deliver them an honest listing of sources from the Web. This is what Google does best and their popularity makes them a "trusted-source" for each of those searchers. Very few of those users would ever expect Google to knowingly and actively alter the information expressed on websites found through its vast index. The auto-links feature of their new tool-bar does exactly that.

It has been two weeks since the introduction of the third (beta) version of their popular tool bar. Google, one of the most known and loved brand names on the Internet is quickly burning bridges with the webmaster community as, it pushes forward with the auto-linking feature embedded in the toolbar. Literally hundreds of well known search marketers, writers, forum contributors, bloggers and independent webmasters have condemned auto-links. This feature, in case you've missed the controversy, will automatically add links to a website viewed while using the toolbar, without the permission of the original site designer or site owner. While the auto-link feature is designed to activate by a limited number of triggers such as an ISBN number (link to that ISBN at Amazon.com) of a book or a street address (link to a generated Google-Map for that address), content creators around the world are furious. Some see this

as the thin edge of a wedge that could put independent operators effectively out of business while others fear expansion of the current feature or even worse, adoption of the concept by rival search firms.

The controversy has not yet spilled over into the mainstream media, however it has become a dominant issue in the SEM world, spurring a widely circulated [petition](#), dozens of Blog entries, the creation of [Auto-Link busting code](#), and this angry but humorous 12-minute [video](#). It is no longer a matter of "if" the mainstream media covers this story but "when and how" it covers it. Google knows it has a problem with the auto-links feature however, the real world sometimes demands we choose between two evils. Google's other big problem is found in the mainstream world and it could spell evil for investors and stock valuations. Google was called a one-trick-pony. Ouch...

A One Trick Pony?

The other day, respected investment analyst Charlene Li of Forrester Research called Google a "one-trick pony". Google generates almost all of its revenues from paid-search through the AdWords and AdSense programs. For almost a year it has reached out to Fortune1000 companies in a bid to entice them into buying more ad space but at the beginning of March could only boast about 230 clients from the world's top 1000 corporations. In the eyes of the investment community, dependence on an ad-model that only 23% of the Fortune1000 buys into marks a major weakness in Google's revenue chain. Being a "one-trick pony" might not be a bad thing if your pony's trick is consistently winning races. As Motley Fool editor [Rick Aristotle Munarriz](#) wrote, "It's true that Google is riding a one-trick pony when it comes to paid search -- but it's such a nimble jockey." That thinking only works in optimal track conditions of course. Forrester Research projects a slip in the growth rate of paid-search advertising this year from the 45% growth seen last year to about 30% in 2005.

Coupled with the growing webmaster discontent as outlined above, the track Google's "one-trick pony" runs on may be getting worn and rutted. Even the most nimble jockey needs to take great care when running on a difficult track.

Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes? (But who is to guard the guards themselves?) [Juvenal](#) 160 A.D
The growing discontent felt by webmasters who depend on Google listings was heightened today with the discovery that Google may use tactics it punishes others for. The highly popular ThreadWatch.Org posted several proofs of Google using cloaking and keyword stuffing on pages originating from the Google domain. Cloaking is the dark-art of serving one version of your site to visitors and another to search engine spiders. In its [Webmaster Guidelines Statement](#), Google states quite clearly: "Don't employ cloaking or sneaky redirects." Check out the titles in the two examples of the same Google AdWords page cited here: [Visitor View](#) | [Cloaked View](#)

Cloaking is considered deceptive, especially when used in conjunction with another dark-art SEO tactic, keyword stuffing. Take a second look at the titles used on the two example pages listed above. The overuse of the word traffic (traffic estimator, traffic estimates, traffic tool, estimate traffic), in the title is blatant SEO spam and is considered punishable by banishment from Google's index. At least that's what we have been telling StepForth clients for years. We have seen Google ban sites that used cloaking and/or keyword stuffing and have helped clients get their sites back into the Google index after suffering such fate. For SEOs who wished to follow the "ethical" path as defined to a large degree by Google's Webmaster Guidelines, seeing Google use these tactics is like watching your Boy-Scout leader hot-wire a truck. When the "black hats" in the sector are done howling with laughter, it is only a matter of time before they start to use similar tactics again. After all, Google does it.

Conclusion

Some mystics say our lives evolve in seven-year cycles. Larry and Sergey have had an amazing seven years since they first devised Google's predecessor, " BackRub". Perhaps their psychic pendulum is swinging away from guaranteed success or, perhaps they are simply making a series of really dumb decisions in Mountain View. Regardless of the reasons, Google is playing fast and loose with its own reputation and in an environment as image conscious as ours, that behaviour is not only dangerous, it is potentially deadly. On the Internet, you are always one click away from oblivion. With Yahoo, MSN, and Ask Jeeves doing as much or more for their loyal users than Google, one wonders where the tipping point lays.