

## Google's Bad PR Day

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Three bad headlines sitting on the fence,  
One fell over and made them look dense,  
Another fell over and they started to spin,  
and that's where the power of media comes in.

It must have been a Monday.

Google has had another bad day on the public relations front yesterday. Three stories about Google made search marketing headlines which, for a company as interesting and innovative as Google is fairly typical. Yesterday's headlines however were a headache for Google and should act as a heads up for Google's executive team. Columns appearing in both the mainstream and the technical press pointed to three major PR blunders, each of which could be considered a fairly significant scandal in its own right.

The first and possibly most damaging item comes in the form of a directive issued to Google employees banning them from speaking with representatives of one of the Internet's most popular news services, C-Net news. The story became active across the Internet late Friday afternoon and is spreading like a bad PR plague, appearing in mainstream publications such as [The New York Times](#) and [CNNMoney](#).

The issue started innocently enough back on July 14 when CNet reporter Elinor Mills wrote a [three page story](#) about personal information collected and displayed by Google. In the story, she used Google CEO Eric Schmidt as her active example dredging up a great deal of non-work related information including Schmidt's income, his neighbourhood, his political affiliation, the fact that Schmidt attends Burning Man Festivals and that he and his wife once danced to Elton John performing Benny and the Jets live at an Al Gore fundraiser five years ago. The piece also mentions the dozen or so other ways Google collects private information about its users noting fears that what was once considered private might somehow become very public.

The publication of such information, all of which was found using the Google search engine elicited a swift and not so subtle reaction from the search firm's PR department. According to a piece written on [August 4](#) by the same author at CNet, "Google representatives have instituted a policy of not talking with CNET News.com reporters until July 2006 in response to privacy issues raised by a [previous story](#)."

Google has not confirmed the story but at the same time, it has not denied it either. In response to seven questions posed by email from StepForth News;

1. Is there a ban on providing information to CNET news?
2. What is the purpose of such a ban?
3. Does Google appreciate such a ban might cause an info-chill for other journalists? Is that the point?
4. Does Google have any comment on privacy issues raised by the original article?
5. Will this experience move Google to take the privacy of the individual more seriously in the future?
6. Should we expect Google to take similar actions against other journalists in the future?

Google's PR head David Krane politely responded, "Thanks for the note. We'll decline comment".

The situation between Google and CNet is very troubling. Assuming that the report of a ban is correct, the only possible purpose could be to punish the entire CNet news team and send an implied threat to other journalists. Threatening writers is rarely seen as a good thing, especially when the firm issuing the threat happens to be the world's most popular information source, one that obviously holds a great deal of information about its users as well as its staff. In this case, no news is definitely not good news.

Another headline yesterday noted that Google has issued an update for its popular toolbar. In this update, the controversial AutoLink feature of the toolbar is automatically enabled. AutoLink was included in the third version of the toolbar. When active, AutoLink adds links to a document if content in that document triggers it. Currently limited to providing links to FedEx (package tracking numbers), Amazon.Com (triggered when a book title or ISBN is mentioned), Google Maps (when street addresses are placed on a document), and vehicle histories (when a vehicle ID number is entered), AutoLink actively alters web documents, regardless of who created them. While the feature is said to assist Google users, the bottom line is that it will force content change on documents created, for the most part, by private webmasters.

Earlier this year, the inclusion of AutoLink caused a huge stir and Google promised the feature would be inactive unless opened by individual users. On March 3, Google's Consumer Products Director, Marissa Mayer said in an interview with the [Washington Post](#), "We think it's important to see what the publisher intended first. It is a user-elected option, meaning if you are using AutoLink, it is because you knew about it and decided to click that button up at the top of your browser." Yesterday, Google issued the upgrade with Autolink automatically enabled. Either Ms. Mayer was misinformed at the time or Ms. Mayer was misinforming Google users.

A third headline yesterday led to an article about the troubles Google's former National Sales Director, Christina Elwell faced when she told her former employer she was pregnant with quadruplets and coping with medical issues arising from the pregnancy. Just a few months earlier, Ms. Elwell was singled out for praise at a national sales meeting as a strong contributor, one of the people who made last year's IPO successful. After telling her supervisor she was pregnant, Ms. Elwell was informed her position was terminated and offered a lesser role (which was eventually filled by someone else).

In a [lawsuit](#) filed against Google last week in a Manhattan federal court, Ms. Elwell states, "... her career was derailed by a series of demotions and a firing," and that she was, "... branded a human resources nightmare by supervisor Timothy Armstrong, VP of National Sales." The suit charges Google and Mr. Armstrong with employment discrimination, retaliation, violation of state human rights law, and infliction of emotional distress. Google spokesperson Steve Langdon told the New York [NewsDay](#), "The lawsuit against Google and Tim Armstrong is without merit and we will defend vigorously against it. The NewsDay piece also quotes Mr. Langdon saying, "Google has exceptional support benefits for employees who need to balance work with family, including generous benefits for expectant and new mothers."

It is important to note this case has not yet been heard in court and Ms. Elwell's allegations may be proven to be without merit. The story itself is out there though and it is generating a fair degree of interest.

If Google is lucky, these things really do come in threes. Any one of the three issues would be a PR-nightmare for most firms. To complicate matters, Google might not be the top-dog much longer, at least not based on size. Another headline made its way into the public realm late last night. It seems Google's

largest rival, Yahoo! has been quietly expanding its database of spidered sites. It now claims to be over twice the size of Google's containing over 19-billion unique documents, approximately 11-billion more than Google says it holds.

Hopefully, yesterday's news, combined with the Search Engine Strategies Conference being held just down the road from the GooglePlex will act as a head's up for Google's management. Problems like these don't just go away though as Microsoft has aptly proven, they can be managed if one's ship is large enough to weather stormy seas. It is however highly unlikely Google will emerge from this year with their "do-no-evil" reputation intact.