

## **Is Adolescent Google's Voice Changing?**

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What is happening behind the scenes at Google these days? Trying to figure out exactly what is happening behind the closed doors of the Googleplex is much like trying to get solid information on the Illuminati. One can find lots of rumour and conjecture but there are a very limited number of individuals willing or qualified to offer a credible quote. For obvious reasons, Google does not allow its employees to talk to the media without first obtaining several levels of permission.

Built on the corporate ethics motto, "Don't Be Evil", Google promised the world it would think and act differently from its corporate cousins when it issued its IPO last August. What a difference half a year makes in the minds of those who depend on Google.

Google has a growing public relations problem. Starting in early January with the introduction of the "auto-links" feature in the third beta version of their popular Toolbar, Google's reputation as the darling of the search world has taken a number of recent hits. In late February Google, along with ten other leading search firms, was named in a lawsuit which states they continue to charge for clicks they know to be fraudulent. The plaintiffs in the suit are trying to be accredited with class action status to allow other advertisers to join in. This week, two new controversies brewing in the background are leading many in the Search Marketing sector to view Google itself as a threat to the SEO/SEM industry.

Reports from a number of paid-advertising focused SEMs say that Google is poaching their larger clients out from under them. For those unfamiliar with advanced PPC management, if an accredited SEM has a very large client with a very large budget, Google provides a direct contact/sales rep to help manage the campaign. This extra assistance was originally sold to the SEM community as a benefit of partnering with them. In a recent Search Engine Watch Forums [post](#), European SEM Mikkel deMib Svendsen (well known on both sides of the Atlantic), reported that Google refused service to another (unnamed) European SEM who had just signed up a very large corporate client. According to the post, the Google rep told the SEM firm two things. First, the Google rep informed the SEM that the corporate client was one Google wanted to serve directly. Secondly, the Google rep said the SEM firm was simply too small to deal with such a large client and that, in the interests of the client, Google would take over the account. In other words, Google considers some clients of SEM firms to be THEIR clients, not those of the SEM firm.

Other reports have Google offering organic page and site optimization advice directly to webmasters and businesses, a move that could spell doom for many in the burgeoning SEO sector. If Google begins offering basic optimization information to webmasters, many may choose to perform optimization internally, sidestepping professional SEO firms. Optimization services are also offered by Ask Jeeves and Lycos through partnerships with third-party firms.

Does this spell the end of the chilled but mostly friendly symbiotic relationship between Google and the SEO/SEM industry, or is it just another in a series of misunderstandings and missteps Google has been involved in over the past six months? There are two distinct schools of thought on this question.

The first says that due to the sins of the growing minority of SEO-spammers, it was only a matter of time before Google decaded open season on search marketers. Google may feel forced to take action. 90-95% of its revenues come from Paid-Search Advertising, a medium that relies on high user retention and maximum ad distribution. Recent forum postings at Search Engine Watch and ThreadWatch written under the title "[Black Hat PPC](#)" offer ideas on how to radically-game your PPC campaigns. Google must therefore take an immediate stand that might be somewhat over-reactive to protect whatever integrity its core-revenue generator has left. In this scenario, Google is simply laying down whatever version of the law it sees fit at whatever time it feels it necessary. This argument is bolstered by last week's release of the 63-point patent document that describes a more rigid link-evaluation system than most SEOs thought Google used.

The second school of thought says this is all a big brouhaha, a molehill over Mountain View of sorts. Google is not interested in being predatory. They already have scads of money and a few revenue generation machines. Google is interested in protecting the integrity of their search related products, especially AdWords. In some cases, that means shutting down techniques used by a few firms that specialize in taking advantages of every single loophole and techno-bug they can find. The person who noted his friend's SEM firm had a client poached by Google happened to be the author of an essay entitled, "The Art of Black Hat PPC Management: Applying Black Hat SEO techniques to PPC", by Mikkel deMib Svendsen. This doesn't suggest that Mikkel's report was untrue; it is just worth noting that Google itself might have legitimate issues with the source. Even though Larry, Sergey and Eric have each stated that Fortune1000 companies are seen as their target-clients, they don't really need to poach revenue from SEM shops. They do however need to stop the pros from promoting the sort of anarchic mayhem often seen in the organic listings.

Proving once again there are at least five sides to every issue; a Google spokesperson issued this statement when asked about the poaching-post at SEW:

*Google believes the search engine marketing community is an extremely valuable and important industry, to both Google and advertisers. We work with advertisers in whichever way best meets their needs, whether it is through a third party or direct.*

*The Google Advertising Professionals program is designed to empower the ecosystem of third parties around AdWords by providing tools and training to help them manage accounts. The program is designed for all individuals, from small SEMs through large agencies.*

*We do not comment on compensation and are declining to comment on the particular complaint.*

That 'bout clears it up, eh?

There are obvious changes happening with Google and its relationships, both internal and external. There is a stratified atmosphere existing under the surface and if it suddenly seems that everything is about money, that's because everything is about monetization. Google seems to be in that awkward adolescent stage as it starts to deal with the harsh realities of shareholder satisfaction, a rapidly growing search sphere, and the increasing sophistication of the technologies it brings to search. In the midst of such change, a culture shift was inevitable. The real question to ask now is, "What kind of a global citizen does Google want to be as it grows up?"

