

Google and the Temptations of Maturity

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Google celebrated its tenth anniversary by working, another new example of how the company feels it still has a long way to go before reaching its goals. As stated graphically by one of its executives, there won't be any Rolling Stones concert. Nonetheless, media coverage of the event has placed special emphasis on the spectacular development of the company founded by Sergey Brin and Larry Page in September 1998. And even more so with the recent barrage of new products—now totaling around 50—which the company is using to one-up its main rival, Microsoft.

While Google's search engine, the origin and source of its power, continued to increase in market share at the expense of its competitors, the company was busy launching the online encyclopedia Knol, the Web browser Chrome, and the G1 cell phone based on its open-source mobile platform Android. Meanwhile, it was bolstering its existing applications and services, both those developed in-house and those it steadily acquired thanks to its selective yet bold purchasing policy.

With that panorama, the fact that Google did not take full advantage of the advertising opportunity presented by its tenth anniversary seems rather anecdotal. It is no secret that being how it is, the king of Internet advertising does not exactly preach by example. Or that its marketing is as stark as the interfaces of its Web apps, believing that the best advertising is the usefulness and simplicity of those products. Despite that, the activities of the Palo Alto-based company always come to fruition, even when they involve something as simple as installing solar panels at its offices. Given that many technology providers claim to be taking measures in favor of the so-called green computing, those activities are no longer news. But not in the case of Google, who by merely announcing that it is looking into installing server farms in the ocean receives a gratuitous torrent of information that only the charismatic Apple could aspire to.

“Google, a decade of innovation that has shaped the Web,” sums up a headline from the specialized publication ZDNet, which is on the same wavelength as most of the media that have evaluated these past ten years. They highlight the company's ability to understand upcoming trends before their rivals do: orienting themselves toward the Internet, group projects, mapping systems, content sharing, blogs, videos, books, social networks, advertising systems, online office applications and Web services offered free of charge and without limitation, the intensive use of open-source software and opening up its API interfaces...a keen business sense that has given the company a wide-open path on the Internet, a place that just a few years before appeared destined to be fenced in by Microsoft.

The latter, which is four times larger than Google, is also constant source of news, although its products are no longer untouchable for the press as they were back in its golden years of Windows 98. Now, on top of that, despite the vast resources it spends on marketing, the Redmond firm is appears powerless in its efforts to counter the less-than-enthusiastic general reaction to its Windows Vista operating system. Moreover, years of constant legal battles have done nothing to improve its image. Nor has its attempt at grabbing onto the power of Yahoo! in an effort to regain some of the ground lost by MSN in the search realm, a move that ended in an unprecedented failure for Microsoft, one that Google did not entirely dodge.

While Microsoft may be at a crossroads, Google is not impervious to future shortcomings. Eric Schmidt, who has headed the company since 2001, should not ignore headlines such as “Google is Watching You”, published by BusinessWeek or Red Herring; or the cover of The Independent with the same words (with the double “o” in Google filled in with spying eyes)...nor the information along the same lines printed in thousands of blogs that demonstrate that the initial buzz that tends to accompany all major successes is also starting to affect the firm in Palo Alto. The company can still avoid making this kind of mistake if it is to fulfill the prophecy that the best is yet to come for Google. Anyone feeling threatened by its omnipresence on the Internet would appreciate if its slogan, which is to “organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible,” went along with a firm commitment to maintain the personal privacy of its users and the independence of their searches. Nevertheless, the experience of many companies, including that of Microsoft, confirms that it is easier to beat one’s rivals than to overcome one’s own temptations.