

# Google executive pushes privacy concerns

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Peter Fleischer, Google's Global Privacy Counsel poses for a photograph in Jerusalem, Tuesday, Oct. 26, 2010. Google's global privacy counsel says he's surprised by how few people choose to control what ads are steered their way \_ a tool which the Internet search giant launched, albeit with minimal fanfare, over the past year. (AP Photo/Sebastian Scheiner)

(AP) -- Google's global privacy counsel says he's surprised by how few people choose to control what ads are steered their way - a tool which the Internet search giant launched, albeit with minimal fanfare, over the past year.

Paris-based global [privacy](#) counsel Peter Fleischer said Tuesday that the tool - which enables users to prevent targeted ads or alter the parameters used to steer ads their way - was visited by tens of thousands of people per week.

That's a tiny fraction of the user base of the world's largest search

engine.

"I have to say I am puzzled about why more people don't use more of the privacy controls," said Fleischer, speaking at a round-table with journalists at a privacy conference in Israel.

"It's a question that we ask ourselves. ... Is it that people feel comfortable with the status quo? Possibly."

He also said Google was hoping to get the word out about such privacy initiatives.

Google targets ads based on fields of interest it identifies in users, as evident in the "cookies" left behind on their Web browsers - virtual footprints showing which sites were visited. Thus it identifies preferences not with an individual or even IP address - which would presumably have greater value to advertisers - just the particular browser.

Under the relatively new "ads preference manager" a user can wipe out these cookies or alter the subject areas that were identified.

"You can say, 'You've been showing me ads for sports - I actually want travel,'" Fleischer said.

The facility is reachable by searching for "ads preference manager," by clicking on "ads by Google" buttons that appear along with certain targeted ads, and through a somewhat cumbersome process via Google's home page.

Fleischer said that of those who do use the tool, only "one in seven make a change ... which is a surprise to me." The count is suspect, however, because Google bases it on browser use - but often more than one user

has access to the same browser, and some use more than one browser.

Fleischer also addressed the challenges of launching global Internet products when societies have different privacy tendencies.

He noted the divergent reactions to its Street View project - which provides street-level images on Google Earth and Google Maps - as a prime example.

In Germany, authorities had demanded that Google allow citizens to request their homes not be pictured in Street View - and Google agreed and says more than 244,000 Germans have done so.

"And yet, in neighboring countries like Denmark and the Netherlands, there's essentially no debate whatsoever," Fleischer said. "It tells me that privacy is very much also culturally defined."

Street View set off a firestorm when Google admitted that its researchers collected wireless information including entire e-mails, URLs and passwords. In a statement Friday, Google Vice President Alan Eustace said, "We are mortified by what happened," listing steps to protect privacy.

Another reflection of how cultural differences can play out: last March a Milan judge convicted him and two other [Google](#) employees of violating the privacy of an autistic teen because the Internet giant sought profit when it hosted an online video of him being bullied. The three were given suspended six-month sentences in a criminal verdict that was condemned by defenders of Internet freedom.

Fleischer did not comment on that affair, but did say he expected more efforts to agree on common privacy policies around the world.

"The Internet itself is driving (a) growing awareness," he said. "A lot of countries are coming together and talking about it more because everyone recognizes that it requires more of a global approach, more of a global framework."

He said that already "people are detecting more of a convergence between European and U.S. policy debates" on privacy - suggesting that Americans are becoming increasingly concerned about the issue.

"There's certainly much more privacy debate in the U.S. now than ever in my two decades of being involved in privacy law."

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