

Art contest draws Google into another privacy flap

February 24 2011, By MICHAEL LIEDTKE , AP Technology Writer

(AP) -- Google Inc. thought it was doing a good deed last month when it opened an annual art contest to more kids across the United States. The gesture instead has turned into another opportunity for Google's critics to question whether the Internet search leader is overstepping privacy boundaries by seeking too much information from its users.

In this case, [Google](#) initially asked parents to provide the final four digits of their children's [Social Security numbers](#) along with their dates and cities of birth to ensure there were no duplicate entries.

After school administrators, parents and a children's group balked, Google dropped the request for the partial Social Security numbers. The change occurred Feb. 18, about halfway through the two-month entry window for the fourth annual "Doodle 4 Google."

But Google's about-face evidently didn't stop parents from complaining to Bob Bowdon, the director of a documentary about problems in the public education system. In a commentary published this week on the Huffington Post website, Bowdon asserted that Google conceivably could figure out the all nine digits of the children's Social Security numbers and create a database that could turn into a gold mine of personal information.

Although there was no evidence of Google manipulating the data, other critics pounced in blog postings and wondered whether the company had violated its "don't be evil" motto.

At the very least, the backlash demonstrates that Google needs to monitor its employees more closely to ensure they are sensitive to the [privacy concerns](#) looming over the Internet's most powerful company, said Parry Aftab, a lawyer specializing in privacy in security.

"I don't think Google was being evil-minded here," she said. "But this is a classic example that large companies often make when the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. I am sure this is a case of some employee having what seemed like a good idea without really thinking through all the implications."

Google acknowledged it needed to do a better job training its employees last October after a series of privacy missteps. In the most extensive, an engineer created a program that enabled Google to collect personal information from unsecured Wi-Fi networks in the U.S. and more than two dozen other countries as the company's cars took photos for an online mapping service. Google also fired an engineer in Kirkland, Wash., last year after it discovered he had been spying on the online accounts of four minors.

The request for parts of children's Social Security numbers arose as part of Google's effort to attract more entries for its Doodle contest, which judges the most creative drawings of the company's logo. In the three previous competitions, Google relied on school administrators to hand out the applications and prevent duplicate entries.

This year, Google wanted to make the entry forms available to all eligible children, even if their school wasn't participating. The four digits from Social Security numbers initially were seen as a way of verifying people's identities, although the company said it later realized it didn't need that information to protect the contest's integrity.

"To be clear, all data concerning students that is collected by Doodle 4

Google is used only to administer the contest," the company said in a statement. "The last four digits of the Social Security number were not entered into our contest records, and any forms containing this information will be safely discarded."

Google declined to say how many children submitted entries before the form was changed. Last year's contest attracted 33,000 entries. The deadline to enter this year's contest is March 16.

The internal breakdown that led to Google requesting the partial Social Security numbers shouldn't discourage parents from letting their children enter this year, said Anne Collier, executive director of ConnectSafely.org, which seeks to protect kids online.

"It was a stupid mistake, but they corrected it so let's move on," Collier said.

More information: Bob Bowdon's opinion piece: <http://huff.to/hrTuln>

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