

# Beauty in the eye of the Googler

October 27 2011, By Mike Swift

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Google Inc. has been described as functional, powerful, scary, speedy and fun. But beautiful? Hardly ever.

New CEO [Larry Page](#) is trying to change all that, cribbing a note from one of his business [role models](#) and competitors, the late [Steve Jobs](#) and Apple Inc. Almost immediately after becoming CEO in April, Page ordered a redesign of Google's online properties, attempting to create a unified look and feel that would proclaim "Google," just as the aesthetic character of Apple products renders them instantly recognizable. The universal redesign is the first in the company's 13-year history.

Google's new, less-cluttered look debuted with the Google+ social network at the end of June, and is now being phased in to Gmail, Calendar, Documents, Search and other Google sites across the company's online empire. While Google's plans for a wholesale face-lift were overshadowed by the hubbub over the launch of Google+, Page months before had set in motion a crash program by the company's user interface (UI) designers to remake the face of Google.

"Larry likes things done fast, so he was like, 'Hey guys, can we completely transform Google's look and feel by the summer?' " said Jon Wiley, the company's lead user experience designer for search. "As designers, we kind of felt like we were the dog that had caught the car."

With its geeky, data-driven identity, Google has rarely been lauded for its aesthetics. But with consumers flocking to Apple's iPhones and iPads, and with Facebook launching new products that emphasize look and feel

as well as functionality, Google and other Internet companies are increasingly focused on appearance, as well as how they work.

"It's really clear that consumers care about (design) now," said Khoi Vinh, former design director for The New York Times website, who is working on a startup connected to the [iPad](#). "In an earlier age when tech was still rough and immature, you could win on technology alone. But now, tech is mature enough that people really value and look for the best possible design. It's why Apple sold 4 million [iPhone 4S](#)'s" its first weekend on sale.

Interactive design students in programs like New York's School of Visual Arts have become targets for Silicon Valley recruiters, with companies like Apple, Yelp, Twitter, Facebook and Google making job offers to recent graduates, said Liz Danzico, chairwoman of the school's MFA interactive design program

Her students are in demand because tech companies are realizing that design "can be a differentiator for users," Danzico said.

Facebook made waves in design circles in April when it bought Daytum, a startup for collecting personal statistics and sharing them through striking digital graphics, bringing its principals Nicholas Felton and Ryan Case to Silicon Valley from New York to work on its upcoming Timeline feature. Facebook touted the acquisition at its annual developer conference this year, and Vinh said other tech startups, like Groupon, Airbnb and Pinterest have raised the bar for online aesthetics.

Page "cares passionately about great design," and believes a common "design language" could unify Google's array of online products, Wiley said.

Google appears close to launching its new look and feel for its popular

Gmail product. A video on how the new design will work with Google's email service popped up this week, and the company didn't deny its authenticity.

"Oops, you weren't supposed to see that. Stay tuned, we'll be sharing more info on Gmail's new look soon," Google said in a statement from a spokeswoman.

The redesign includes new shapes for buttons; the hiding of many controls until they're needed, resulting in a cleaner look; consistency of appearance across desktop computers, laptops, tablets and smartphones; and a "color language" where bolder reds, blues and greens all have specific meanings. Even the search homepage - a product whose aesthetic minimalism has been praised in the past - got a revamp, with a smaller Google logo.

Google's face-lift has drawn praise from design experts, although the consensus remains that the company hasn't matched Apple. On his blog, Vinh called the update "less beholden to the brutally analytical decision-making that has guided Google product design and aesthetics in the past."

In an interview, he called the Google redesign changes "competent," and "professional," but said there was room for improvement: "I don't think any of them are as much of a 'wow' moment as what you would get from Apple, which is one of their main competitors."

Page tried to drum up some attention recently, bringing up the changes during Google's quarterly earnings call with Wall Street analysts, as he talked about how Google+ is intended to be a model for the rest of Google.

"Our ultimate ambition is to transform the overall Google experience,

making it beautifully simple, almost automagical, as we understand what you want and can deliver it instantly," Page said.

"Think about it this way: Last quarter, we shipped the '+,' and now we're going to ship the Google part," Page told analysts. "The new visual design - beautiful, consistent UIs for Search, News, Maps, Translate and lots of other features - is only the beginning of that process."

Wiley, a former improvisational comedian who once hoped for a career on "Saturday Night Live" before discovering the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s, said removing "clutter" is one of the biggest thrusts for the redesign.

Google has always been colorful, he said, but its use of color has not always been effective. Color "is additional information for the eye; it creates a lot of visual information. That can start to actually get in the way of the content. What we wanted to do was be sure there was a focus on the content."

In the new Google design, a bolder red is a cue the user is about to create something, such as a new spreadsheet. Blue is the color of action, meaning "do it; go for it; make it happen," Wiley said. Green is the color of sharing.

There are fewer visible controls. In Google Docs, for example, the buttons to organize or delete a spreadsheet are hidden until you click on the file. And the buttons are designed to work for touch screens as well as mouse-driven clicks.

Wiley said the personality and culture of a company should translate into the feel and function of its products.

"Yeah, we are creating a language for Google," he said. "We are trying

to tell a story with the design that is reflective of Google's character and personality, the things that make Google, Google. It's kind of hard to describe in words."

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## GOOGLE MAKEOVER:

Google is creating a unified look and feel for its online products. Among the changes:

-A less cluttered look: In [Google](#) Docs, many controls are hidden until a user clicks on a file and activates them. The page has more open space.

-New "color language": Red is the color of creation. In this case, you click the red button to create a document or spreadsheet.

-Buttons: Have a new shape and texture, and pop up slightly when you hover over them.

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