

# Google's moves raise questions about 'don't be evil' motto

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With its "Don't Be Evil" motto, Google Inc. has always held itself to a higher moral standard.

Now [Google](#) observers, including many longtime admirers of the [search](#) giant, say the Mountain View, Calif., company is behaving more like something it vowed never to become: a conventional company where the bottom line drives decisions.

The signs of that transformation in recent months include an illegal ad deal, a string of [privacy violations](#), an altered privacy policy that a key regulator called "brutal" for consumers and a change in search results that appear to favor Google's own social network, Google+, over competitors.

Google has about 12 times the revenue, 11 times the employees and arguably far more power over the Internet than it had when it proclaimed its idealism and went public in 2004. But as the Internet evolves to a more social and [mobile Web](#) where a search engine can no longer tie everything together, Google is threatened as never before. The company is locked in an intense competition with rivals such as Facebook Inc. and Apple Inc., and it faces a patent-lawyer gutter fight with [Microsoft Corp.](#) and [Oracle Corp.](#) over the intellectual property behind its crucial Android mobile operating system.

"I hesitate to think they've gotten 'evil,' because they never were that 'good' to begin with," said Danny Sullivan, editor-in-chief of Search Engine Land, a website that covers search news. "But I do think it marks a much more aggressive company, a company that is not hesitant to do things, even if those things might draw more criticism than in the past."

Last year, the U.S. Department of Justice required Google to forfeit \$500 million for hosting ads from online Canadian pharmacies that led to the illegal importation of prescription drugs, and the [Federal Trade Commission](#) slapped the company with an order requiring 20 years of independent privacy monitoring after a privacy breach with Google's Buzz social network.

In January, the world's dominant search company was accused of compromising its most basic values of fairness and objectivity by highlighting results from its Google+ social network over competitors like Twitter and Facebook.

Then, in February, Stanford University researcher Jonathan Mayer caught Google bypassing the privacy settings in Apple's Safari browser.

And, later that month, 36 state attorneys general wrote Google to complain that privacy plans the company had publicly claimed benefited

consumers were in fact an "invasion of privacy." European regulators said Google's changes violate European law, and FTC Chairman Jon Leibowitz called Google's take-it-or-leave-it stance a "somewhat brutal choice" for consumers. On March 1, Google enacted the changes anyway.

To many veteran Google watchers, that pattern of behavior represented a distinct break from the past for a company that promised its search results would be "objective" and "unbiased," and invoked the famous phrase "Don't Be Evil" in a seminal letter to shareholders before its 2004 IPO, in which co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin said: "Google is not a conventional company. We do not intend to become one."

Google says it has not compromised its values, and that its recent privacy stumbles, such as the Buzz social network that led to the FTC order and the Safari breach, are simple mistakes caused by trying to move too quickly in the innovation race with its competitors.

"It's important to separate shortcomings from strategic decisions, like the decision to simplify our privacy policy or the launch of Search plus (Your World)," said Jill Hazelbaker, a Google spokeswoman. "There is no question we are moving faster, and this increased velocity has generally come with improved execution. Particularly in technology, fortune usually favors the fastest innovators.

"We take a long-term view, and the end goal is one simple, beautiful Google experience," she said.

To be sure, Google continues to do many "Googley" things for the social good, such as investing more than \$900 million in green energy, or hosting a program in which the company regularly welcomes young minority Internet entrepreneurs from around the country to present their ideas at the Googleplex. But Google's leaders - particularly Page, who

returned to the role of CEO a year ago - appear increasingly willing, observers said in a series of interviews in recent weeks, to make the same choices conventional companies do, choosing business imperatives over social values.

"In a certain sense, Google is being held to a higher standard," said Jon Fox of consumer advocacy group CalPIRG, referring to Google's privacy stumbles. "When Facebook does really nasty things, people are like, 'Oh well, it's Facebook, what can you expect from them?' But as Google is maturing, they are running up against that problem more and more of not doing evil."

John Battelle, a prominent tech blogger and author of "The Search," one of the first definitive books about Google, said the company doesn't have the locked-in network of customers that Facebook has, with its 850 million socially connected users, or Apple, with its popular iPods, iPhones and iPads connected to a powerful content system like iTunes.

That means Google "needs to become a unified platform that includes identity and relationships, or they face extinction. When you put it in that context, you can understand why they are doing some things that are frankly anathema to a lot of people, including me," Battelle said. "I think Larry Page identified that as the single most threatening thing Google faces and set about fixing it, and he's breaking some eggs to do it."

Google ignited a storm of criticism in tech circles when it announced a major change in its search results Jan. 10 that it dubbed "Search, plus Your World." For the first time, Google said its results would include "your personal content or things shared with you by people you care about" by featuring content people had posted on its Google+ social network.

The problem, said a loud chorus of critics, was that for most people, the

idea of "Your World" also included Facebook or Twitter, services that have far more users than the 8-month-old Google+.

Instead, a Google search for "Mark Zuckerberg" was turning up results for Zuckerberg's Google+ page, where the Facebook CEO had never posted - hardly the most relevant result. Google was simply using its search dominance, critics charged, to prop up a less popular product, Google+.

"It's definitely a unique and different thing that doesn't have a comparison to anything else I've seen them do in their past," Sullivan said. "I just have never seen them put something on their search results page that was not inclusive of a wide variety of sources."

Google countered that Twitter and Facebook were preventing its search engine from crawling and indexing most of the other social services' content. But Sullivan said that even with those restrictions, Google could have done more to be fair, such as showing the public profile pages of people on Twitter and [Facebook](#).

"They didn't try to go the extra mile to show that they really were being inclusive," he said.

But privacy - how Google uses the financially valuable personal data that it collects to target advertising - is emerging as a centerpiece of the debate about whether Google is willing to sell its soul for money.

When Google announced a significant change to its privacy policy Jan. 24, the company emphasized it was simplifying more than 60 privacy policies into a single, readable statement.

But the company did not explain in detail what was changing in practice. In the past, such Google services as search, YouTube and Gmail stored

separate reservoirs of data about their users. Now consumer data from each Google service is being shared among all of them.

That means Google can draw an increasingly detailed portrait composed not just of your search history, but including who your friends are on Google+, your personal appointments from Google Calendar, your Gmail correspondence, your work and personal documents from Google Docs, your online reading habits from Google Reader, and the phone numbers you dial on Google Voice. The disclosure detailing the change, pointed out by Rainey Reitman of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a digital rights group, came only after a letter to Google from eight unhappy members of Congress.

"I think in many ways some of the things Google has been doing lately might be rooted in a need to be an innovative, creative company trying new things," Reitman said. "However, the significant effects of these things on privacy can be quite extraordinary. Because so many people rely on them for services, it will affect millions of people. I think we have to hold companies that have this much data to a higher standard."

Some critics, such as Steve Pociask, president of the American Consumer Institute, said the Safari breach revealed Feb. 17, where Google bypassed built-in privacy settings on Apple's browser, was the last straw, and that regulators need to take antitrust or other action to rein in the search giant.

"The workaround, the hack trick, to me is the final indication that Google will do anything they can to dominate the market and to destroy their competition, and to collect consumer information even against their will," Pociask said. "I think there are a lot of people finally alarmed."

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