

Google flirts with 'creepy line'

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Google is flirting with what Chairman Eric Schmidt once called "the creepy line." At its recent developer conference, the Mountain View, Calif., search giant showcased a number of new personalized technologies that many consumers will find useful, such as alerts of upcoming flights and restaurant recommendations.

But the new services underscore the vast amounts of ever-more-[personal data](#) Google has collected on its users. And given its history and the apparent [attitudes](#) of its leadership toward [consumer privacy](#), the new services raise concerns about how Google collected that data and what else it's doing with it.

That's because, while the company typically offers such services nominally for free, it's not being simply altruistic. We pay with our data

for the services Google offers, and it's not always clear how the company uses that currency.

"People need to understand the fundamental business model of Google. We are not Google's customers. We're Google's product," said John Simpson, director of the [privacy](#) project at [Consumer Watchdog](#), an [advocacy group](#).

But it can be difficult for consumers to remember that point, especially when Google rolls out all its neat new stuff.

Google's new Maps site, for instance, has been completely revamped. Now, when you click on a pinpointed location on the map and then ask for directions to it, Google will automatically provide directions from your home; you don't have to enter your address first. The new Maps application will also suggest restaurants you may like based on ones you've visited in the past.

Similarly, Google's new photo gallery in its Google Plus social network will automatically highlight photos in your collection. Among pictures it will bring to the fore are those that include your friends and family members - which it detects automatically.

Meanwhile, Android phones will now have the ability to detect whether users are walking, cycling or driving. And users will be able to set so-called geofences, which can send alerts when they arrive at or cross certain locations.

With these services, the company is providing a compelling, even cool service for consumers. But what's enabling it to do so is the detailed dossiers it has compiled on each of us that. If this detailed information were being collected by a neighbor or the government, many of us would consider it disturbing or even dangerous.

Google knows this, of course. In an interview with "The Atlantic" three years ago, Schmidt foretold this kind of future in which Google would offer services so sophisticated that the company would know - without users having to type anything at all - what they were thinking about.

In an emailed statement, Google spokeswoman Nadja Blagojevic said that the company considers consumers' privacy and security one of its top priorities. "We aim to provide the world's strongest security and privacy policies as well as easy-to-use tools," she said.

And Eric Goldman, who runs the high-tech law institute at Santa Clara University, argued that there's little to worry about.

"When companies overstep their bounds, consumers just won't use the service or will think lesser of the brand and will reduce their loyalty accordingly," he said. "That pushback can be incredibly effective at changing the behavior of companies."

But Goldman acknowledges that the line between creepy and cool is not fixed, and that corporations try to push the boundaries of what's acceptable behavior. Privacy advocates note that it's in those company's economic interest to have people share ever more data.

Simpson says the problem is that companies will keep pushing for more data until they've gone far beyond what customers initially thought was acceptable.

"The danger is that they're going down a slope, and all of a sudden, they've passed the bright line and you don't know how they got there," he said.

He says it's not always clear what data Google is harvesting and what's ultimately being done with that data. And, privacy advocates argue, there

are good reasons to distrust Google in particular with our personal information.

The company has had a string of privacy scandals, and the company's leaders have frequently evinced a tin ear when it comes to privacy concerns. Schmidt, for instance, once admonished people that if they have something they didn't want people to know, "maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place."

The data that [Google](#) has collected could be used to discriminate against individuals in terms of what credit card offers they receive, what mortgage rates they are offered, even what medical treatments they might be offered, warned Jeff Chester, executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy, a privacy rights group. And it could be used by law enforcement agencies who would never have been able to assemble such detailed dossiers on individual citizens.

"The danger is that the data is being used to target them to make decisions about their personal lives in ways that can be harmful to them, that's not transparent to them and about which they can't have a say," said Chester.

And that's just not cool.

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