

Google faces up to image problem in Europe

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In this April 17, 2007 file photo, exhibitors of the Google company work on laptop computers in front of an illuminated sign of the Google logo at the industrial fair Hannover Messe in Hanover, Germany. Google is starting to accept requests from Europeans who want to erase unflattering information from the results produced by the world's dominant search engine. The demands can be submitted on a Web page that Google opened late Thursday, May 29, 2014, in response to a landmark ruling issued two weeks ago by Europe's highest court. (AP Photo/Jens Meyer, File)

As Google bowed to a European court ruling to consider users' claims to

remove embarrassing search results, the company took the first step toward preventing any more such punishing decisions—acknowledging it has an image problem in Europe.

The [company](#) was stunned in May when a court said it would have to accept Europeans' "right to be forgotten" online and field their requests to delete links to [personal information](#) in [search results](#). It opened the doors to such applications on Friday, and took the opportunity to offer a new, humbler message to European authorities.

"I wish we'd been more involved in a real debate in Europe," Google CEO Larry Page said in remarks published by the Financial Times Friday. "That's one of the things we've taken from this, that we're starting the process of really going and talking to people."

Some would say Page's realization comes not a moment too soon.

The company, which since its early days has put a premium on keeping a positive image, has taken a beating in Europe in recent months. Its public relations machine seemed to run completely off the rails in May, when the European Court of Justice enshrined the 'right to be forgotten'—a concept Google had said amounted to censorship and which it had fought to undermine.

Criticism of Google's dominance in search —it enjoys a 90 percent market share in Europe—reached a fever pitch this year, with competing search engines and major publishers attacking the company, and even consumer rights groups piling on.

Politicians, perhaps smelling a shift in public attitude, began openly using the company as a punching bag. Shortly before European elections, German economic affairs minister Sigmar Gabriel criticized the company for its tax avoidance, privacy policies, and dominance, and

suggested it might need to be broken up.

And in a development that should deeply concern a company whose motto is "Don't Be Evil," some European online freedoms groups are now identifying it as public enemy number one.

That has boosted the case for the European Commission, the EU's executive, to demand Google change the way it displays its search results to allow for greater competition. If the two can't reach a compromise deal, Google could face fines worth billions of dollars, as Microsoft did in the 2000s.

Anti-Google sentiment used to be an "edge phenomenon," said Hans de Zwart of Bits of Freedom, a Dutch digital rights group. "Now it's slowly moving toward the core," he said. "More and more people are feeling this."

Reasons for the company's fall from favor include products such as Google Glass that raise privacy concerns, as well as ripple effects from recent revelations about U.S. government spy programs.

Zwart said that fairly or not, Google has become directly linked to the National Security Agency in many Europeans' minds.

"Now we have a very clear argument for why it is a bad idea to store data in a centralized fashion with an American company," Zwart said.

"I think it's trivial for the NSA, if they know I have a Gmail account, to get all the data from it."

To comply with the court's May 12 ruling, Google announced Friday it has opened a digital hotline to let Europeans complain when links to embarrassing personal information about them turns up in a search of

their names. The complaints will be vetted and removed unless a company-appointed panel says the public's right to access the information outweighs a complainant's right to privacy.

CEO Page told the FT the company is "trying now to be more European" and will think about privacy in "a more European context."

"A very significant amount of time is going to be spent in Europe talking," he said.

That means putting money where the company thinks more mouths should be.

Shortly after the ruling, Google posted a raft of help-wanted ads seeking "bright, well-organized and spirited individuals to work with a stellar team on cutting edge technology issues" at its offices in Berlin, Rome, London and Brussels.

The job? Lobbying.

"You will handle our various product agendas with policy makers inside and outside government," reads one ad in Berlin.

The company has room to expand efforts to get its view heard. Google employed seven lobbyists in Brussels in 2013, according to voluntary disclosure figures, and spent around 1.5 million euros (currently worth \$2 million). By comparison, Microsoft employed 16 and spent 4.75 million euros.

In Washington D.C., Google outspent Microsoft \$14 million to \$10.5 million.

Mario Marinello, an economist at the European policy think-tank

Bruegel, said he thinks Google can settle its antitrust case with the European Commission by arguing its search results are what consumers want, even if the company's competitors are frustrated by the company's dominance.

"I don't want to defend Google," he said. But "all this lobbying has kind of shifted the question to a very superficial level, which is dangerous."

For Google, it is not clear whether lobbying alone will be enough.

Activist Faith Bosworth of a German group known as Peng Collective said Google has been a media darling for too long.

"They've seen how others have gained a bad reputation, and until recently they've done a good job of avoiding those mistakes," she said.

"They've put money into supporting freedom of expression and been behind some really progressive things, but at the end of the day, they're a corporation seeking to make money," she said.

She said that while individually Google employees probably mean well, the company's business model relies on gathering ever-greater amounts of information.

As a result, Internet users should view Google with a critical eye.

"I think it will be very difficult to live up to 'Don't Be Evil'," she said.

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