Google and the Enterprise: Spring 2009 Campaign

Julius Caesar liked to go to battle in the spring. Google seems to be following in Caesar's footprints. Google is not battling the Belgae or the wily Vercingetorix. Google. is harassing the big dog, Microsoft.

In the first quarter of 2009, Google deployed new and upgraded weaponry. Most of the Google watchers have focused on the intricacies of individual digital gizmos. When I look at the collection of armaments, I find it easier to discern the outlines of Google's 2009 strategy.

Google, true to form, provides few strategic hints about its intentions. The company's triumvirate—Eric Schmit, Sergey Brin, and Larry Page—remain circumspect and vague about the enterprise objective. With the economy faltering, Google may be looking for other sources of revenue just in case the company's advertising gold mine floods with red ink or the roof caves in.

Let's take a look at some of the developments that seem to be tactically significant for the enterprise market and which suggests the weaponry in Google's magazine.

Chrome

Chrome is described in the trade and consumer press as a browser. The Chrome software is, according to the received wisdom, a competitor to Firefox, Internet Explorer, Opera, and Safari. Google disclosed in its open source technical information that the company have invented a system that works like a browser but performs additional functions. For example, a container in Chrome can display content from a specific source or provide a means of accessing a Google application such as GMail.

Chrome lacked until early 2009 an easy way for a developer to extend, modify, or amplify Chrome functionality. Google introduced what it calls extension technology. The idea is that new features can be added, Google published "Chromium Developer Documentation" at http://dev.chromium.org/developers/design-documents/extensions which makes clear that individuals or commercial software development companies can built small applications that run within Chrome. Google offers some ideas to tech savvy users to jump start their extension writing. For example, Google suggests that bookmarking tools might be useful. Privacy controls are another possibility. Firefox has a number of extensions such as the translation widget that I use. Google wants to emulate Firefox.

An enterprise could, for example, develop a security control, filters, or mash up that combines organizational data with Google-supplied information. Microsoft's new Internet Explorer 8 offers some similar functionality. Microsoft dominates in the enterprise, and Google appears to be content to allow the Google power users to probe Microsoft's underbelly for weakness.

Gmail

Gmail received a Beverly Hills' style face lift. The dowdy face of Gmail has been given a multi-paned look. Other changes include making it easy to move email from one "tag", the term Google prefers to "folders". At first glance, Gmail with its calendar and revised look is

becoming more and more like Microsoft Outlook. Google has added a task function so those who have need of an built-in list of "to do" items can work within the Gmail environment as some financial analysts work within Microsoft Excel.

But the mortar with the depleted uranium payload was allowing a user to access Gmail messages when not connected to the Internet. A Chrome user has this local mail function by default. A user of another browser has to download a Google Gears's code component to get the functionality. The method does not download a user's full email archive. The limit is two gigabytes of messages. With this work anywhere, work anytime capability, Gmail is now useful to professionals who may not have continuous email access. A Gmail user can work on a flight and upon landing, reconnect, and transmit the email to recipients. Google, of course, updates the user's archive on Mother Google's servers.

Google may not have created an Outlook killer, but the company's Gmail application is now sufficiently flexible to warrant consideration. A start up company or a field office might find the Google Gmail system an economical, useful way of dealing with an organization's information DNA.

Google Apps

Microsoft Office is to the knowledge worker as Google Web search is to most Internet users. Google Apps are "good enough". Google provides basic word processing, spreadsheet, and presentation functions at a reasonable price point. In February 2009, Google took steps to force organizations to pay. Last year, Google Apps were free for up to 200 users in an organization. The limit was changed to 50 users of Google Apps without a fee.

In the first quarter of 2009, Google expanded its reseller program. The idea is a simple one. An integrator or small software company can resell Google Apps. In fact, anyone can navigate to http://www.google.com/apps/intl/en/business/resellers/index.html, watch a video, and apply to become a Google Apps Authorized Reseller Program. With buzz about Google increasing, some resellers may think, "Not much to lose, not much risk either. Go for it."

For the first time in Google's 10-year history, Google will be expanding the number of partners who can assist an organization with Google technology. One of the justifiable criticisms of Google has been that Google doesn't return telephone calls. The reseller program may change that, putting the intermediary burden on resellers, partners and developers. It is too soon to determine if Google will siphon partners from Microsoft. Google may be content to allow partners to find Google.

Market Buzz

To keep the company in the limelight, Google rolled out enhancements to its Google Maps and Earth product line. The most compelling addition to Google Earth is the inclusion of undersea maps. A user with the Google Earth code installed on a computing device can explore the topography beneath the oceans.

The new service is stunning, and it is a clear reminder that Google can deliver delightful surprises. The combination of real time "fly through" with undersea maps makes obvious Google's computing and technical prowess. Google doesn't provide much information about the "how", but the service itself is remarkable on two counts. First, it is offered without

charge, and, two, the performance is downright zippy even on my pokey Verizon wireless service.

With market share data reporting grim news for Microsoft and Yahoo, two companies losing share to Google, Google now handles somewhere between 70 to 80 percent of Web search traffic. Despite the miserable economy, Google managed to turn in acceptable financial results as it pulled farther ahead of its competition. Ask.com threw in the towel in Web search, announcing that it would become the search engine of NASCAR and focus on niche indexing to support vertical search. Yahoo is in the midst of reorganizing. Microsoft continues to roll out new features for its range of search systems, including SharePoint, Fast ESP, and Live.com. But the impression I have is that these efforts are not tightly integrated.

So What?

Google's spring campaign probes the Microsoft enterprise stronghold in a direct way. Unlike Google's enterprise sorties in 2006 to 2008, Google is using search, applications, maps, and a SWAT team of resellers. Microsoft cannot be indifferent to this direct challenge.

Microsoft, however, has a number of challenges, not just annoyances from Google. The company is faced with the task of integrating its various search technologies into its existing line of enterprise products. On top of this big job, Microsoft has to move these systems to the "cloud." Microsoft like Amazon, Google, and Oracle must take steps to capture revenue from the immature cloud computing initiative. For Microsoft and Oracle, the stakes are high. Cloud computing could sap on premises license revenues. Faced with an economic downturn and price conscious enterprise customers, Microsoft can't rush to shift revenue to the cloud and risk its narrowing margins. Cannibalism of one revenue str3eam for a lower revenue stream could further dampen Microsoft's share price, which continues to be in value-stock range.

More important is Microsoft's need to enervate its products. Microsoft centric companies need improvements in SharePoint stability. The product is complex and can be expensive to scale. Search performance is often an issue, and on premises customers may need to "throw hardware" at this problem in order to achieve acceptable performance. Chief financial officers may curtail information technology spending, thus speeding some organizations' shift to cloud based services.

In short, Google's spring campaign may be little more than an expeditionary force. Microsoft, however, must respond in an effective manner. Otherwise Google could rupture Microsoft's first line of defense and destabilize some Microsoft faithful. Breaking though Microsoft's enterprise defense system may have another effect as well: Google becomes more confident and more aggressive.

Julius Caesar vanquished his enemies with ruthless behavior interspersed with savvy concessions. Google may not have the maturity of Caesar and turn the probe into a bloody rout. The blood would be red ink on Microsoft's balance sheet. The rout would be shifting Microsoft licensees to the Google customer list.

I think this first spring campaign will provide some insight into what will happen in the spring of 2010. What's clear is that Google is hungry for growth. As Catullus said, "Turbida rapacior procella." (You are more voracious than a ravening whirlwind. Poem 25).

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