Google's New Services: The Chiaroscuro Motif

Google's enterprise services received what Italians call chiaroscuro.
The idea is that light falls across a canvas and reveals details that
might otherwise be difficult to perceive. The PR blitz for Chrome as a new
Google operating system is interesting, but it may not make it easy to see
two broader enterprise initiatives revealed in July 2009.

The penetrating light came from two different continents and concerned two
quite different Google services.

The first was the announcement that Google would deploy enhanced real
estate services in Australia. Google has made some real estate
services available in the Google Base service. You can see this
partially implemented service by navigating to http://base.google.com.
You will have to click on the hot link "housing". Keep in mind that
Google changes its services frequently so this link may be moved or
removed. Once you have the Google Base search screen visible, just run
the query Baltimore + "real estate".

The system will display a map of the Baltimore, Maryland, area. When
you click on a push pin, you will see specific listings. A bit of
experimentation reveals that the system holds much promise but does
not provide hot links to other Google services such as one-click
access to Gmail. With a bit of fiddling you can locate real estate
listings in the Google.com search box. I have been able to reach some
Baltimore condo listings via Google Local.

What's clear is that Google has bits and pieces of a larger scale real
estate system available. The company -- at least for this American
user -- has not connected the dots. In my opinion the
dots are chunky, just not easily identified using Google's plain
vanilla interface.

Half a world away, Google and Microsoft emerged as front runners for
housing individuals' health records. The story in the London Times
(http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article6644919.ece)
makes clear that the idea for using Google and Microsoft to handle UK
citizens' health records is a trial balloon. The Times acknowledges
the security and privacy concerns. The paper pointed out that the UK
government's efforts have failed.

If you have not explored Google's medical information service, you
will want to run the query "back pain". Scroll to the bottom of the
first page of results and you will see categories.

When you click on one of these, you will see results grouped. Again,
Google disables certain features without warning, but this is what the
"back pain" query looked like as I write this column from Edinburgh,
Scotland. [insert arnold categories.jpg]

Next, navigate to Google Health at http://health.google.com.

You can take the tour and explore the extensive information about the
program at your leisure. The basic idea is that Google can put one's
medical history in its Google Health system. A physician, for example,
could access that information with the permission of the patient.

You can also explore the extensive health and medical information in Google Scholar (http://scholar.google.com), in Google Books (http://books.google.com), and YouTube.com's collection of health related videos. Available, for example, are programs in which Marissa Meyers and Eric Schmidt explain Google Health. Jerry Lin's two part video about the basics of Google Health is quite informative. You can access it at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKYwiphgWH8

These two events appear to be unrelated. Google "glue" connects them.

At about the same time, Google corporate announced that Google Apps had exited the beta stage. You can read Google's official announcement at http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2009/07/google-apps-is-out-of-beta-yes-really.html.

In the official announcement Google said:

We have much more in store, and IT managers can read more about how to make the switch to Apps in our Microsoft Exchange and Lotus Notes resource centers. One more thing — for those who still like the look of "beta", we've made it easy to re-enable the beta label for Gmail from the Labs tab under Settings.

Let's step back.

We have real estate. We have the UK medical information initiative. And Google Apps and Gmail are officially real products. Presumably a product that is no longer in beta is sufficiently reliable for use in the enterprise.

What makes these three widely separated news stories and announcements interesting to me is that these are not separate products. For example, Microsoft offers its enterprise server software. But its online health information system is a cloud based service that has little or no connection with Microsoft's desktop applications like Word or its entertainment products like the Xbox 360 or the Zune.

Google, on the other hand, has a more homogeneous platform. The plumbing for Google Apps, Google Health, and the Google real estate service in Australia share a common infrastructure. The DNA of the Google software and systems is from the same body of technology. Microsoft, as its massive investments in its online services like Bing.com make evident, is a work in progress.

Google, therefore, is "as is" infrastructure, software, and systems. Microsoft is a work in progress and that work is in the "to be" stage of development.

In my opinion, this distinction is one that makes it possible for Google to deliver new, integrated services to the enterprise with little incremental investment. The real estate and health initiatives illuminate Google's disruptive potential in the enterprise in business sectors that are lost in the shadows of Google's advertising and Web search activities.

Item. Commercial Real Estate. Most organizations have to deal with

real estate whether their organization is expanding or contracting.
Google's real estate service, combined with Google Apps, makes it
possible for a Google partner to develop an enterprise real estate
application that makes it possible for an organization to list
properties it wants to sell or lease and its needs in particular
geographic areas. The combination of Google Base, Google Maps, and
Google Apps provides a developer either within Google or among its
partners the building blocks required to develop a service that can
stretch from site selection to most pre-signing activities.

Item. Employee Health Information. Organizations struggle with a
number of health and wellness issues. These range from providing
employees with information about defined benefit plans. These
documents and the spreadsheets that permit "what if" exploration of
options can be easily accommodated in Google Apps. But some
organizations may want to take a close look at Google Health as a
customizable service. Employees may avail themselves of an option to
store certain information in the Google Health system and employers
MAY provide a wellness service via Google Custom Search or other
combination of Google services and information. The appeal of shifting
benefit communications to Google and to use the Google warehouse of
information as a way to provide employees with useful information
might allow some cost savings.

One question that merits some consideration is, "Why is Google
introducing more comprehensive real estate services in Australia and
encouraging the United Kingdom to make use of Google Health?"

Google is not making any attempt to hide these two initiatives. My
research suggests that Google is taking advantage of interest in
Australia and England because both countries are interested in using
Google services. The US is becoming an increasingly contentious market
for Google with new legal initiatives gaining momentum with regard to
Google Books. The US is also an economy under some stress. Google may
perceive that the opportunities to move quickly and obtain useful
feedback are greater outside the United States.

Other observations that warrant brief comment illuminate the
competitive potency of Google's approach to business. First, Google
can assemble comprehensive services that may be localized for a
particular country such as Australia and be able to deploy these
services in other countries with localized interfaces. The storage of
data and the other back office functions run on the Google global
infrastructure.

Iare not "new". Most are constructions
that have more in common with the way in which Lego blocks are
assembled. Individual parts are combined to build what is needed.
Google's health information services and system is easily enhanced or
tuned to solve specific problems. Yet at their core, the new services
are just different Google services working together to reduce an
information pain.

Third, Google Apps along with other Google technical components such
as its Application Programming Interfaces give clever individuals a
way to build enterprise solutions that tap into Google's
infrastructure as required. With Google Apps out of beta and viewed as

A full fledged product, the number of Google enterprise applications
will increase more rapidly than before.

In short, these initiatives make it easier to discern the depth,
scope, and edges of Google's technical infrastructure. Will
competitors see the new Google that is emerging in sharper detail? My
hunch is that some business sectors underestimate Google. Not a good
idea in my opinion.

Stephen Arnold, July 9, 2009