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Google Glue? Will Google Adhere to You?

Google's approach to products and services is different from a company like Microsoft. Google introduces, almost tentatively, something new. Then if users respond, Google will let the users pull Google forward. Microsoft is a push marketer. The company sets a goal, marshals forces, and releases a product. The contrast between Microsoft push and Google pull could not be more clear.

Google is also different from Web start ups. Web start ups rely on viral techniques. The idea is to catch the attention of a few influential thought leaders, leverage Web log publicity, and tap into social networks. Such a Web 2.0 approach is   reasonably effective, less time consuming, and less expensive that hiring and costly than more traditional promotions. Google, in contrast, has its own high-traffic   Web logs, legions of Google watchers, and the ability to generate headlines   by not communicating.

Individualized pages are branded "iGoogle". You can configure a personalized page, activate mini-applets and use agents to collect information based on your preferences without charge.

But as disruptive as these Google behaviors are to competitors, the company has been creating an even more potent method for generating products and services. I call this method Google Glue, and I want to make   clear that I have not spoken to Google about this notion, nor is it   likely that most Google employees are aware of what the company is putting in place.

You know that Google has APIs, application programming interfaces. Developers can use these software connectors to interact with Google's infrastructure. You can see one of these APIs in action. Navigate to Copyscape.com. This service, as well as Google Alerts, uses Google APIs   to provide two useful services. Copyscape.com makes it easy to identify   some copyright infringement. Google Alerts put links to new content   processed by Google on topics you specify. Both these services use Google APIs (application programming interfaces).

According to Jim Orris, Director of Adhere Solutions (www.adheresolutions.com) a company that provides Google integration services, "I am amazed at how many commercial enterprise do not investigate leveraging the Google platform to enhance their business. We have saved several firms as much as $200,000 by using Google instead of traditional enterprise solutions."

You can navigate to Google's "code" page. This is located   at http://code.google.com. If you spend some time exploring this treasure trove, you will find more than 200 functions, mini applets, and links   to instructional videos. Google has gathered together developer tools,   open source programs such as a Google version of MySQL, and information   about "project hosting". You can also find information about Google's Summer   of Code, a thinly-veiled effort to identify the most promising   programmers, mathematicians, and computer scientists in the world.

Shift gears and navigate to Google "ig" which stands for "individualized Google" or "iGoogle". This is a Web personalization service. You will have to register, in effect identifying yourself to Google. Once you have signed up, you can   customize a Google "portal page" to your liking. After a bit of clicking, you   will see a link to Google Gadgets at http://www.google.com/ig/directory.   These are applets that you can use to customize your Google portal page.   Among the Gadgets available to you are Gmail, a To Do list gadget, and more   than 1,000 others, including a daily dose of Dilbert, NASCAR news, or a   silly golf game.

Let's recap. There are APIs to access the search, advertising, and   other "core" functions of Google. There are developer tools and information   to help aspiring programmers to create applications for Google. There are Gadgets that require no programming experience, so any Google user can jazz up an individualized Google. Taken as a whole, Google has a unique application development system in place.

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You can see a similar technique at work at Amazon or at Salesforce.com. What Google's doing is not unique. Based on my analyses of these three types of code-centric activities, Google is mixing and blending what   most software companies keep separate.

For example, a young programmer with an idea can sign up as a Google developer, get a user ID, and get permission to create an application   that uses a Google core function such as search. There's no charge and not   much Google oversight. If the young programmer creates a service that   exceeds his daily limit of 1,000 queries sent to Google, Google may or may not interact with the young programmer. It doesn't take much thought to realize that a young programmer who creates a high traffic service is probably going to get a question about coming to work at Google.

What if you are a commercial enterprise, developing an application that taps into Google? Google has a mechanism for professionals to "surf on Google." Based on the information available to me, a commercial company signs up as a developer indicating that the software will be a   commercial venture. Google will follow up, and you will enter into a discussion   with Google about what you want to do. One path is for you to become a   Google "partner"; another is to negotiate a deal. Once again the angle is to generate an upside for the partner and obviously for Google.

Now let's compare and contrast these approaches. Industry "pundits" have converged on the opinion that Google and Microsoft will compete with increasing intensity in the months and years ahead.   Microsoft sells its programming tool, VisualStudio, and it gives away a version of VisualStudio with some features disabled. Google lets developers use open source tools or various languages such as C++. So does Microsoft. Microsoft certifies partners. But Google lets partners find an idea. Google may or may not enter into a relationship with financial consideration.

Microsoft wants to build its ecosystem to sell more Microsoft products   and services. Google wants to find potential employees, create an   environment where users can create useful Gadgets, and foster a more diverse   universe of applications that have Google at their center.

In May 2007, Google announced Gears, which is a browser extension. Gears theoretically would make it possible for a Gmail user to work on email when she's not connected to the Internet. Gears is designed to work with most major operating systems. A developer can make any cloud-based   application   work off line, not just Google applications.

Where's the glue? Obviously these programs, applets, and developers coalesce around Google. But the glue is more sticky. Were you aware   that Google provides cloud-based services to a number of major universities. Examples include San Jose State and Arizona State University . Google   wants students to become familiar with Google services. Google wants   programmers and computer science students to know how to create applications that   use Google as an operating framework.

When these young people graduate, most will find jobs. What will be the application development model for them? What will be their familiarity with Google functions? What will be their comfort level with things Google? You can see that the "glue" is a hierarchy of activities that begin   with learning and creating software that costs nothing to use. At the middle level of the hierarchy are individual developers and commercial   concerns creating products, customizing Google services such as the Google   search appliance, and generating revenue for themselves and Google. At the highest level, Google is recruiting, expanding its product and service offerings, and pumping oxygen into its rapidly evolving ecosystem.

The glue, therefore, binds together Google, developers, and users in a non-directive way. The approach is low key, almost indirect. It is slow moving. The method does not depend upon any single initiative for success. Much was made of Google's hiring Vic Gundotra in 2006. The reality is   that Mr. Gundotra is one more molecular element in the Google Glue. True, Google's developer initiative is more structured now than it was two   years ago. But it is still early days.

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Test the stickiness of Google glue yourself. Sign up as a developer or   Get an "ig" account and experiment with Google's point-and-click customization. Will you adhere to Google or will Google "glue" itself to you?

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