

February 26, 2009

STATE OF THE ART

Geniuses at Play, on the Job

By DAVID POGUE

Unless you're just off the shuttle from Alpha Centauri, you're already aware of the product that made Google famous: its Search box. It's become the card catalog for the Internet (and a whopping moneymaker for Google).

But any time you cram some 20,000 of the world's smartest people into one company, you can expect to grow a garden of unrelated ideas. Especially when you give some of those geniuses one workday a week — Google's famous "20 percent time"— to work on whatever projects fan their passions. And especially when you create Google Labs (labs.google.com), a Web site where the public can kick the tires on half-baked Google creations. Some Labs projects go on to become real Google services, and others are quietly snuffed out.

Such innovations — and a number of smart acquisitions — have led to hits like Google Earth, Gmail, Picasa, Google Docs, Blogger, YouTube, Google Calendar and others.

But they have also cultivated a vast jungle of lesser-known features. Unfortunately, it's so vast, you'd need a professional tour guide to help you find the gems.

Hello, my name is David. Keep hands and feet inside the tram at all times.

IGOOGLE

Google.com became famous for its minimalist look. It loaded quickly in the days when dial-up modems ruled the earth.

Today, at iGoogle (google.com/ig), you can dress up all that white space with useful miniboxes containing additional info. Hundreds of useful displays are available: a clock, local weather, movie listings, incoming e-mail, news, daily horoscope, to-do list, Twitter updates and whatever-of-the-day (joke, vocabulary word, quotation, Bible verse and so on).

The best part: this stuff doesn't slow you down. You can type in and execute a quick Google search before all those widgets have appeared.

GOOGLE READER

Why spend your time finding and navigating to the Web sites that cover

your favorite topics? They can all come to you — all nicely congregated on a single page, called Google Reader (reader.google.com).

Technically, Reader is what's called an RSS feed reader, but you don't need to know that. You type in a topic, inspect the search results, and click the Subscribe buttons that look interesting. After that, Reader displays the first paragraph from each site or blog; click to read more. Star items to read later, or pass along your favorites to friends. Fantastic.

FLU TRENDS

One of Google's geniuses figured out that whenever people get sick, they use Google to search for more information. By collating these searches, Google has created an early-warning system for flu outbreaks in your area, with color-coded graphs. Google says that Flu Trends (google.org/flutrends) has recognized outbreaks two weeks sooner than the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has.

GOOGLE MAPS

It's driving directions on steroids (maps.google.com). Choose the directions you want: by car, by public transit or on foot. Drag the path line with your mouse around construction sites or down interesting streets. View current traffic conditions. Turn on Street View to see actual photographs of your destination. Way, way better than MapQuest.

GMAIL LABS

Gmail is already the world's best free Web-based e-mail service, with terrific organization tools and a superb spam blocker. But if you click Settings and then Labs, you find a huge list of on/off switches for cool enhancements.

There's Text Message in Chat (send text messages to your friends' cellphones from within Google Chat or Gmail); Offline Mail (work on Gmail when you're not online); Canned Responses (build a menu of stock answers to your mail); Multiple Inboxes (manages mail by auto-creating multiple mail folders); and the delightful Send & Archive (one click sends your reply and removes the original from the list).

Here, too, is Mail Goggles, which is intended to avert the kind of personal disaster that can result when you send mail while drunk. During periods that you specify (for example, weekend nights from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m.), this feature prevents you from sending mail until you've answered five mental math problems in 60 seconds. (But those Google geniuses can probably do it even after a few pitchers of margaritas.)

QUICK SEARCH BOX

Here's a promising Google Labs project indeed (code.google.com/p/qsb-mac): a sweet, fast little Mac program that opens when you press the Command key twice. Opens programs, searches your Mac, searches the address book, searches the Web, looks up words or weather, and more. And since it's open source, more people will add even more features.

TRANSLATOR

Translate any text or Web page to or from 40 languages (translate.google.com). It's not perfect, but you'll get the gist of that spam from Russia.

800-GOOG-411

Possibly the best voice-recognition cellphone service in existence. Call the number, say what you're looking for ("comedy clubs, Chicago" or "[Domino's Pizza](#), Cleveland"), and Google's auto-voice reads off the closest eight matches. You can speak the number of the one you want, and he'll connect your call automatically — no charge. You never know or care what the phone number was; it's like having a personal secretary.

Or you can say "text message" at any time to have the address and phone number zapped to your cellphone in one second.

GOOGLE SMS

Send a message to GOOGL (46645). In the body of the message, type the sort of information you want: weather report ("weather dallas"), stock quotes ("amzn"), movie showtimes (type "slumdog millionaire 44120"), definitions ("define schadenfreude"), directions ("miami fl to 60609"), unit conversions ("liters in 5 gallons"), currency conversions ("25 usd in euros"), and so on. Five seconds later, Google texts back the details.

GOOGLE ALERTS

Keep tabs on what the world is saying about you, your company or your interests. At Google.com/alerts, type the search phrase (like your name), and specify which channels you want to monitor (blogs, Web pages, discussion groups and so on). When someone mentions you online, you hear about it in an e-mail alert. It's a personal clipping service — no charge.

GOOGLE SETS

At labs.google.com/sets, type in several items in a series (like "cleveland browns" and "dallas cowboys"); Google fleshes out the list with others like it (all the other football teams). Great when something's on the tip of your tongue (a kind of fruit, president, car, holiday, currency) but can remember only something like it.

SECRETS OF THE SEARCH BOX

Usually, whatever you type into Google's Search box is treated as a quest for Web pages. Certain kinds of information, however, get special treatment.

For example, you can type in an equation (like "23*9/3.4+234"); press Enter to see the answer.

Think of Google, too, for conversions. For example, type "83 yards in inches," "500 euros in dollars," or "grams in 3.2 pounds"; then press Enter.

Google is also a dictionary (type "define:ersatz"), package tracker (type your FedEx or U.P.S. tracking number), global Yellow Pages ("phonebook:home depot norwalk ct"), meteorologist ("weather san diego"), flight tracker ("AA 15"), stock ticker ("AAPL" or "MSFT"), and the world's best movie-listings site (type "movies:10024," or whatever your ZIP code is).

Oh, dear, look at that — the end of the column is approaching, and we haven't even mentioned Sketchup (free 3-D software), Scholar (search all published academic papers at once), Books (search inside millions of books — see a snippet of the text), Sync (two-way wireless synching of your Google calendar/address book with your iPhone, BlackBerry or another smartphone); GrandCentral (unify your phone numbers and voice mail systems), and all of their friends.

But that's all right. Already, that's enough good free stuff to last you a lifetime. Or at least 20 percent of one.

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