

Google Struggles with Its "Do First, Ask Forgiveness Later" Strategy

There's an old saying: It's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. Few companies embody the concept more thoroughly than Google (GOOG). Boldly undertaking business and dealing later with consequences is as much a part of Google as search algorithms. However, the tactic takes as much from the company as it gives.

There are multiple examples of Google undertaking a business initiative without asking permission and then having to deal with the fallout in one way or another:

- scanning and indexing books that were in copyright, which turned into a class action lawsuit by publishers and authors
- Google News has engendered heavy friction with news publishers and has also turned into some
- making Gmail users' personal contact lists open to casual view through Buzz, resulting in a quick apology
- Street Views has become a major privacy issue in Europe
- Belgian-based papers sued Google over having published summaries of their stories along with links; Google had to remove the material

The issue, I think, is that Google's entire business model rests on the ability to use for profit information it neither generates nor licenses. It presumes a right and acts accordingly until another party raises significant objections, and then Google still tries to get its way. I'm not suggesting that other companies don't try to get their own way using hardball tactics. But Google often moves without privately clearing the way ahead of time, turning what might otherwise be negotiations into a public display. You can see the presumption in action in the company's negotiations with China over dropping search filtering. It was an "all or nothing" approach at the beginning. Google tried pushing and China moved no more than the Great Wall. Suddenly, Google began waffling, showing that it knew it would have to compromise and is now in talks with the country.

I understand the motive behind presumptive plays. Sometimes a company wants to move in a direction and someone else won't even consider discussion or negotiation. In such cases, doing first, apologizing later can help shift the status quo and bring the other party to the table. However, for Google, presumption is often the only tool in its case. That's called using a hammer to solve every problem. The result is wasting time and money, because there are some things a hammer can't presume to do effectively.

Ref: <http://industry.bnet.com/technology/10006070/google-struggles-with-its-do-first-ask-forgiveness-later-strategy/>