

DESIGN LIFE NOW

NATIONAL DESIGN TRIENNIAL 2006

Podcast Transcript: Marissa Mayer of Google

Marissa Mayer, Vice President of Search Products and User Experience. So I've been responsible for Google's design for almost seven years now. Google News collects news stories from thousands of newspaper Web sites around the world and using computer algorithms only it publishes a newspaper so you get to see some pictures, headlines from all around the world and really have a news reading experience that pulls on all the collective judgments of the editors. And because there's so many different headlines per story you actually get to see a lot of different viewpoints. It changes the way people read news because they end up reading more news from more countries with more perspectives on any particular issue.

Another one of the innovations we have had in the past three years is Google Maps and Google Earth. We felt that the mapping technologies in the Internet just weren't very good. Google Maps strives to be very interactive so you can drag and drop maps, zoom in and out really smoothly almost as if it were software that was installed on your computer but it's actually running through the Web. We have a lot of new technologies that make that possible.

And then, we acquired a company called Keyhole and they had satellite imagery for almost the entire world, so we launched a product called Google Earth that allows you to see satellite photos of the world. When I think back to probably the beginning of 2005, maybe one or two percent of the entire population had ever seen a satellite photo and we now know that hundreds of millions of people in the last year either through the satellite imagery available on Google Maps or through the Google Earth client have actually seen their home through a satellite photo.

The third product that I would highlight is a product called Google Desktop and this is a product that took our search engine and made it possible to use it on your own files on your own computer. We wanted to be able to search all the files on your computer, but we really wanted to strive to make Google Desktop a photographic memory for your machine. So in addition to searching your files, it also searches over any Web pages that you've seen as well as your IM chats. So, if you know that you've seen it on your computer you can find it again with Google Desktop.

I think there are a few things here at Google that make our innovation really work and allow us to achieve a type of speed of innovation that we've seen. One is that we're committed to really small teams. We've also tried to make sure that people have the freedom to really explore their creativity. We have a policy here called 20% time. And what this means is that Google makes available to any individual 20% of the time that they work here to work on whatever they want. We just think that when you give smart people good tools and let them work on the ideas they're really passionate about, really amazing things happen.

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And then we also have the culture of our offices. There's a lot of toys around. There's a lot of snacks. There are games, free drinks, as well as laundry that you can do right here in the office, free lunch, and I think that all of that combines for a very homey feel and a very creative place where people feel really comfortable because it feels like home, but also because it's sort of different than what you'd expect, it actually evokes you to think about things differently.

The simplistic design of the home page was done by Sergey Brin, who was one of our founders. And I get the question a lot of how did Google decide to pursue this minimalist path? Was it because you have such respect for simplicity? When I went and asked Sergey this question, 'cause I wanted to be able to answer it, Sergey looked at me as if I were a little crazy and said, "We didn't have a Webmaster and I don't do HTML." So Sergey wanted to spend as little time possible creating the first web page.

In fact the first Google home page had just an image, which was our logo, and a search box. It didn't even have a button because it turns out the return key works just fine. And so we kind of stumbled into our minimalist look through dumb luck.

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful. I don't really see a place in Google's future where we take over media because if you look at our historical approach it's to search the data, it's to organize the data, it's to present it in interesting ways. We don't think that we're newspaper editors and we don't think that we're videographers, or directors, or publishers of books. So what we really want to do is harness the amazing outputs of those creative people and work to make their products more findable for others and more usable. So when you look at initiatives like Google Books we look at what would it mean to humanity, and what would it mean to the world of search information if every printed piece of information were actually on line and searchable. We think that's a really amazing goal over all for the future.

We tend to focus a lot more on users. What's the user problem? What's the user need? What's the user experience? Will this be good for the users? Will it be in the user's best interest? And that's really where the inspiration and impetus for our design comes from. So when we're thinking about adding a new feature we ask ourselves how often will this be used? How useful will it be to the users? And if the answer is less than 20% of users will use it or find it useful, we generally don't put it on one of our major pages. We won't put it on the result page. We'll put it on the advanced search page or the preferences page.

And we also have another rule, which is if less than 5% of people will ever use it we just don't want to do it. We don't think it serves enough people to justify the clutter and sort of the information overload. So even on the advanced and preferences page those are options that we think at least 1 in 20 people would want to use.

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When your company name becomes so innocuous it really means you're filling a user need. You're making your users really happy and you fill fundamental role in their daily lives.