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NET NEUTRALITY

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Did Google Just Cross Over?



By Mike Pearson
 E-Commerce Times
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Has Google's chipped and tarnished halo been replaced by horns? In the eyes of Net neutrality proponents, yes. However, their wrath may not do much damage to Google's reputation. "Google is used by hundreds of millions of people, and maybe .0001 percent of them -- only those who listen to public radio or are in the technology business -- know what Net neutrality is," said Katie Delahaye Paine, CEO of KDPaine & Partners.

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Sellout. Unprincipled. Evil.

These aren't the sort of adjectives [Google](#) (Nasdaq: GOOG) executives are used to hearing applied to their little startup, now a US\$150 billion company that has grown from a simple search engine into a dominating corporate powerhouse that even has its own foreign policy challenges.

However, the company has been in for a bruising in some quarters since the announcement this week that Google and [Verizon](#) had fashioned a framework for arcane Net neutrality discussions that many critics say would lead to a tiered Internet at the expense of free expression.

Among other things, the framework would leave wireless carriers free to charge for premium access to some features.

Vocal Critics

Critics have accused the company of dropping its long-held position in favor of unfettered network neutrality to placate Verizon, an important wireless partner for Google's [Android](#) mobile phone OS, pointedly bringing up the company's famous "Don't Be Evil," mantra as they do.

"This sellout of long-professed principles is tremendously damaging to the company's image," said John Simpson, consumer advocate with [Consumer Watchdog](#), a pro-network neutrality public policy group.

"People are now saying, 'Google isn't special. It's just like every other giant corporation,'" Simpson told the E-Commerce Times.

Consumers Insulated From the Chatter

On the other hand, there are those who argue that Google's not likely to suffer significant impact from the Net neutrality dust-up -- or from ongoing privacy questions related to its use of consumer data, its street mapping program, and that program's supposedly inadvertent slurping of WiFi signals.

"Google is used by hundreds of millions of people, and maybe .0001 percent of them -- only those who listen to public radio or are in the technology business -- know what Net neutrality is," Katie Delahaye Paine, CEO of [KDPaine & Partners](#), told the E-Commerce Times. "By the time they understand it, the news bubble will have burst."

Indeed, Google has been under scrutiny for months by privacy regulators around the world, public policy advocacy groups, and others concerned about privacy gaffes -- but the company still came in first in global reputation in a May survey of consumers conducted by the [Reputation Institute](#), a corporate reputation consulting firm.

Fair Warning

It's unlikely the debate over Net neutrality, which isn't closely watched or understood by most consumers, will have much impact on the company's reputation in the short term, Rob Jekielek, a principal consultant for the Reputation Institute, told the E-Commerce Times.

However, the tensions should come as a warning to Google leadership that they need to broaden their perspectives. Consumers expect a market leader like Google to take positions, Jekielek said, but they want a broad range of constituents included in the discussion. That's something Google failed to do in this case.

"One of the things that's a very big hit against them in this particular case is they've gone out with one particular company and said, 'This is how things should be,'" commented Jekielek.

Google's Defense

Google didn't respond to a request for comment in time for this article's deadline.

However, the the company's telecom and media counsel in Washington, Richard Whitt, did take to Google's Public Policy Blog to defend the company on Thursday.

"We're not so presumptuous to think that any two businesses could -- or should -- decide the future of this issue," he wrote. "We're simply trying to offer a proposal to help resolve a debate which has largely stagnated after five years."

Google is the "leading corporate voice" on network neutrality, Whitt argued, maintaining that it opted for a compromise agreement on leaving wireless broadband access unregulated to help move the debate forward.

The wireless sphere is increasingly competitive and open, he said -- in no small part thanks to Google's own Android operating system -- and consumers have more choices for wireless than they do for wired home broadband. **ECT**

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There's one thing proponents and critics of the Google-Verizon Net neutrality plan might agree on: It would be nice to know who's in charge. The FCC would have to do some redefining of broadband service in order to claim authority. In the meantime, it's an election year, and members of Congress might see more opportunities in introducing legislation than in passing it.

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