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Why Google Isn't New Coke -- But Microsoft And Yahoo May Be Pepsi

by Chris Copeland, Tuesday, Dec 4, 2007 3:00 PM ET

ONE OF THE GREAT PRODUCT launches of the late 20th century and one of the greatest product failures of all time was New Coke. Launched as a counter to the rise in popularity of the Pepsi Challenge, the new formula of Coke was designed to be a sweeter version of the long-standing category leader. In his book "Blink," Malcolm Gladwell chronicles the advent of New Coke. Long since the industry leader, Coke found itself in a dog fight in the '80s for market loyalty with Pepsi. Then came the Pepsi Challenge where people were given two samples to try and always seemed to pick Pepsi. Leaders at Coke decided to outdo Pepsi with a new creation called New Coke. Designed to win in taste tests (which it did), the product turned into a disaster when Coke loyalists rose up against the new drink. The reason? Old Coke was preferred over both Pepsi and New Coke in home consumption tests versus taste tests. In fact, Coke was never in jeopardy from Pepsi because while Pepsi gave testers a quick fix due to its composition, over the course of a full can most favored the Original Coke taste.

I was reminded of this part of the book two weeks ago as I assembled with 80 other search specialists from 20 countries within the Outrider search network. Over the course of two days, we heard a variety of search points of views from internal constituents as well as a presentation from each of the Big 3 engines. Three key points struck me as they focused their discussions on the search engine aspect of their business.

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Searchers are not the marrying kind. Everyone talks about the big leads Google has in all markets (except China and a few select locations). But few talk about the lack of dedication searchers tend to show to any one engine. Research from Compete.com shows that over one quarter of all Google searchers will go elsewhere for some of their search activity. Yahoo holds exclusivity of searches for less than half of its audience, while MSN barely tops 25% of its users who are willing to go steady.

A 2006 study conducted by a French professor showed across 14 categories that Yahoo and Google have virtually the same satisfaction scores, and no engine scored above-average in the study. Yet Yahoo and MSN seem committed to expanding the base, rearranging the SERP and focusing on new applications and extensions of its portal in an effort to diversify how people use search and get to it. The logical question would seem to be, if the experience is marginal at best and searchers are willing to date on the side given the right relevant information, why not build destinations and expertise in specific areas that could position you as a leader, not a pack player?

Putting the consumer first is a starting point, not a destination. One of the scariest revelations came when an audience member asked Microsoft what exactly they intended to do to increase market share. Now, this was after a 30-minute presentation about what Microsoft was rolling out that would enhance search results. All of the enhancements were either in the space today (just not on Live Search) or were not what you would call a game changer. The response from Microsoft: "We are focusing on the consumer." The audience was so dumbfounded that no more questions were asked. In sports we call that invoking the "mercy rule." Clearly Microsoft, and Yahoo to a lesser extent, mean well, but here are companies in a clear trail position and their big ideas seem to be to play around the edges. Say what you want about Ask.com -- but at least the company embraced its underdog role and came to the market with something that is different and created an identity.

Search needs Microsoft and Yahoo to succeed, not Google to fail. Everybody seems intent on finding the "Google Killer." What search really needs is for Yahoo and Microsoft to rise to the challenge and put out differentiating and attractive platforms. Google holds over 90% market share in some European countries and unless other players give consumers

good reasons to shift their searching behavior, then they likely won't. Better maps and integration with video and images are nice, but a year from now if every engine isn't integrating as many digital assets from as many sources as possible, wouldn't we all be extremely disappointed?

When you watch all the players in the space, you would think that Google had the only secret sauce that would sell, and it was better to copy its approach than create a new vision of search results. In 1995, Netscape was the dominant browser, only to be virtually wiped off the map in less than three years by Microsoft IE. Did everyone else get out of the browser business? Of course not. Firefox and others came along and through their streamlined nature, savvy partnerships and highly flexible and customized features created a distinct market for themselves. It is not a big market (think Ask.com size), but it is a loyal, going-steady-and-not-fooling-around type market.

So, why not in search? If you are Microsoft, why not embrace the communities of developers with the ability to better integrate with your Live Search product to create a more targeted and unique platform? Or Yahoo, why not embrace some of the tenants of Google's Open Social movement into search? Use the numerous assets within the social space and the endless content within the network to create a personalized network versus the current status quo.

The desktop search space race is virtually dead. No one seems to want to challenge the Google model, with Yahoo and others touting the race in Mobile, Local and other platforms. But market share and familiarity can do wonders to help Google capture success in those spaces. It is time for Yahoo and Microsoft to decide how they want to be viewed -- as white-labeled knock-offs or industry leaders. They could be, as Pepsi once claimed, the choice of a new generation, or they can keep their formula so similar to the perceived leader that they are no better off than New Coke.

Chris Copeland is senior partner/managing director for Outrider, a search marketing firm headquartered in St. Louis and a GroupM company. Contact him at Chris. Copeland@outrider.com.

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