

Google's chief on social, mobile and conflict

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Lately, stories about Google often seem to be stories about conflict — Google knocking heads with China or the Justice Department or Facebook.

For Eric E. Schmidt, Google's chief executive, that is a good sign. "This is winning," he said this week, speaking to a group of reporters at Google's Zeitgeist conference in Arizona. "If we were losing, we would not have these problems."

Mr. Schmidt gave a few updates on those conflicts and rivalries, as well as some others. Expect to see social tools from Google this fall, he said, but do not expect a brand new social network. Instead, Google will add social components to its core products.

He and other Google executives were not shy about needling Facebook for making it difficult for Google to import social information. Upon signing up for Facebook, people can import their Google contacts, but it does not work the other way around, Jonathan Rosenberg, senior vice president of product management, noted.

"The best thing that would happen is Facebook would open up its network and we'd use that information to improve our ads and our search," Mr. Schmidt said. "Failing that, there are other ways in which we can get that information, which is what we're working on."

He described another rivalry — the one between Google and Apple over mobile phones — as different than the one with Facebook. By increasing competition, that rivalry benefits both companies and both can do well, he said.

Google's Android business is flourishing, he said, despite the fact that Google makes no money on it because it gives the mobile operating system away for free.

"I have been surprised at how important Android is for our business," Mr. Schmidt said. "It's fundamentally because Android is seen as representative of the new model of computing, and people are dying to put their best applications on an open platform."

The situation in China is stable, after Google temporarily shut down its search engine in response to assaults from hackers and now redirects users to the Hong Kong site. But the Chinese government could change that arrangement at any minute, Mr. Schmidt said.

He also spoke about another government-related conflict: the Texas attorney general's investigation into Google's search results and whether Google unfairly favors its own services over other Web sites.

Google does not promise that it will treat all Web sites neutrally, he said. "What we promise is the best answer that we can come up with, as judged by the end user."

Sometimes that is a Google site and sometimes it is not, he said. "There is not a deliberate favoritism from a business perspective. There is a favoritism from what end users prefer, and we have ways to measure that."

Regarding the Department of Justice review of Google's acquisition of ITA, the flight software company, Mr. Schmidt said he expects the deal to go through.

Google, which has been on a shopping spree lately and particularly interested in buying social networking and advertising start-ups, has picked up the pace of acquisitions and plans to keep it that way, Mr. Schmidt said.

But do not expect to see all the start-ups' products live on, branded with Google. "Most of the acquisitions that we are doing are focused primarily on technical talent," Mr. Rosenberg said.

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