

Google's Gmail Offers Search, but Tests Users' Trust

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Google's Gmail service promises free e-mail with rich organization and search capabilities. But enterprises should protect their security by sticking with desktop or enterprise search products.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Event

On 31 March 2004, the search provider Google announced that it is testing a free search-based e-mail service called Gmail. Users who submit a request at www.gmail.com will be notified when the service is available. Gmail will use Google's search technology to organize messages according to topic and search across the message header and body.

Analysis

E-mail overload is caused in part by the inability to search through e-mail quickly and efficiently. Gmail is Google's effort to address this growing problem. Third-party niche technology vendors, such as Enfish and 80-20 Retriever, tackle e-mail overload with e-mail client add-ons. These products provide some level of categorization or prioritization, but the vendors that offer them lack the market share and reputation achieved by Google. On the other hand, these contemporary search technologies are distinct from the repository they search and may be interchanged or even run simultaneously — unlike Gmail, which will presumably work only on mail stored within its system.

Gmail provides Google with an opportunity to enter a fresh market, currently dominated by America Online, EarthLink, MSN and Yahoo. Gartner believes Google will be testing the trust it has earned among its users by serving ads intended to be relevant to actual e-mail content. In the past, even as the benefits of personalization were widely advocated, Web e-mail vendors have considered such a step to be very risky. Many operate under the assumption that highly targeted personalization based on e-mail content has the potential to infuriate users, who may not believe assurances that the automated ads do not violate their privacy (see the Gmail FAQ at <http://gmail.google.com/gmail/help/about.html#ads>). Users should understand that by agreeing to Google's conditions, they are giving Google permission to process their e-mail for the purpose of juxtaposing advertisements with it — an extension, Google notes, of scanning systems that already exist for virus protection and antispam filters.

By making an online e-mail client easy to search, Google may also seek to give users the incentive to store large volumes of e-mail, eventually generating a for-pay premium service. Google believes the typical user won't need more than 1,000 megabytes, and Gartner agrees that this is likely to be the case if high-bandwidth images, music and video aren't included.

Recommendations

- Enterprises should not use free consumer-based e-mail, because it lacks enterprise-level management and security. Enterprises that require broadly searchable e-mail should instead consider desktop or enterprise search products.
- Marketers may evaluate Gmail as a new means of targeting specific consumer segments.
- Consumers who use Gmail must determine whether they wish to be targeted for marketing messages based on what they write in their e-mail messages.

Analytical Source: Maurene Caplan Grey and Whit Andrews, Gartner Research

Recommended Reading and Related Research

- "With Free E-Mail, You Get What You Pay For" — Free e-mail accounts may be unsuitable for enterprises, because they focus on selling products or services to the consumer, not on hosting enterprise mailboxes. **By Maurene Caplan Grey**
- "Google Offers Enterprise Search in a Service, or in a Box" — Google's success at relevant results for Web-wide search serves as its ramp to an enterprise search product. **By Whit Andrews**

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