



Motto: Don't Be Evil

Sergey Brin? Stacy Sullivan? Hiroshi Yamauchi? Paul Buchheit? Amit Patel? Marissa Mayer?



Organization: Google? Nintendo? Student Pugwash Conference?

Dear Quote Investigator: Google was founded in 1998, and after a few years one of its employees suggested the following company motto:

Don't be evil.

Would you please explore the provenance of this slogan?

Quote Investigator: The earliest solidly dated evidence located by **QI** appeared on a webpage titled “Great Jobs at Google” which once existed at the following web address:

www.google.com/jobs/great-people-needed.html

The historical content of the page can be accessed via the Wayback Machine of the Internet Archive. A snapshot dated March 27, 2002 displayed the following text in a column on the far left of the page. Emphasis added to excerpts by **QI**:^[1]

In a word, Google's goal is to do important stuff that matters to a lot of people. In pursuit of that goal, we've developed a set of values that drive our work, including one of our most cherished core values: **"Don't be evil."**

The page also listed "10 Things Google has found to be true"; number six was thematically related:

You can make money **without doing evil.**

The motto has been credited within Google to two different early employees: Paul Buchheit, one of the creators of Gmail, and engineer Amit Patel. The date of origin varies between 1999 and 2001. Details are given further below.

Here are additional selected citations in chronological order.

In 1990 "The Seattle Times" of Washington published a lengthy article about the top video game company Nintendo. The journalist asked the billionaire president Hiroshi Yamauchi about the ethical values he wished to communicate, and Yamauchi replied with a guideline similar to the one associated with Google a decade later:^[2]

What is Nintendo doing with its vast audience of children and adults? Like Disney, is Nintendo trying to teach moral values? Should it try? What is it teaching?

"Thinking from the fact that our game software's story is designed according to **do no evil and practice virtue**, Nintendo is teaching moral value in the same way Walt Disney is," was the reply.

In 1999 the "Contra Costa Times" of Walnut Creek, California published an article about a movement recommending that scientists should take an ethical oath or pledge. This position was advocated by a speaker at the Student Pugwash Conference. The title of the article included a version of the saying under analysis:
^[3]

Scientists Weigh Taking an Oath to **Do No Evil**

Since ancient times, the Hippocratic oath and its direction to doctors to “do no harm” has served as a sort of ethical compass for physicians.

Scientists have no such equivalent, even though their work increasingly takes them into matters with moral, ethical, humanitarian and social implications.

By March 2002 the motto was being displayed on a webpage of the Google domain as noted previously in this article.

In December 2002 “The Daily Record” of Baltimore, Maryland attributed the slogan to computer scientist Sergey Brin who created Google together with fellow student Larry Page:^[4]

In the words of one of its founders, Sergey Brin, **“Don’t be evil.”** Ever innovative, however, in 2002 Google started Google News, where one can search and browse 4,000 continuously updated news sources . . .

In 2007 the website “Google Blogoscoped” published remarks by Google engineer Paul Buchheit who asserted that he suggested the motto during a corporate meeting in “early 2000”:^[5]

I believe that it was sometime in early 2000, and there was a meeting to decide on the company’s values. They invited a collection of people who had been there for a while. . . .

It just sort of occurred to me that **“Don’t be evil”** is kind of funny. It’s also a bit of a jab at a lot of the other companies, especially our competitors, who at the time, in our opinion, were kind of exploiting the users to some extent. . . .

But the real fun of it was that people get a little uncomfortable with anything different, so throughout the meeting, the person running it kept trying to push **“Don’t be evil”** to the bottom of the list. But

this other guy, Amit Patel, and I kept kind of forcing them to put it up there.

In 2008 “The Sydney Morning Herald” of Australia printed remarks from Google executive Marissa Mayer in which she attributed the slogan to engineer Amit Patel circa 1999.^[6]

“It really wasn’t like an elected, ordained motto,” Google’s vice-president and 20th employee, Marissa Mayer, said in an interview during her trip to Sydney last week. . . .

Mayer explained that **Don’t Be Evil** was coined in 1999 by one of Google’s first engineers, Amit Patel, who shared a work cubicle with Mayer.

The intensively researched 2011 book “In the Plex: How Google Thinks, Works, and Shapes Our Lives” by journalist Steven Levy said that the motto was formulated during a meeting held July 19, 2001. The session was convened by human resources head Stacy Sullivan, and about fifteen people attended including: David Krane, Paul Buchheit, Amit Patel, Joan Braddi, Marissa Mayer and Salar Kamangar. Sergey Brin and Larry Page were not present.

Sullivan’s goal was to outline a set of corporate values for Google. She requested ideas from participants, and she wrote them down on a giant pad on an easel. Levy quoted Buchheit who said that he submitted the slogan:^[7]

“So I suggested something that would make people feel uncomfortable but also be interesting. It popped into my mind that **‘Don’t be evil’** would be a catchy and interesting statement. And people laughed. But I said, ‘No, really.’”

The slogan made Stacy Sullivan uncomfortable. It was so negative. “Can’t we phrase it as **‘Do the right thing’** or something more positive?” she asked. Marissa and Salar agreed with her. But the geeks—Buchheit and Patel—wouldn’t budge.

In conclusion, the motto was publicly visible on the Google website by March 2002. Paul Buchheit and Amit Patel advocated for the motto within Google. **QI** believes

that the account presented “In the Plex” is probably the most credible, and Buchheit submitted the saying during a meeting in July 2001.

Years earlier in 1990, Nintendo leader Hiroshi Yamauchi employed the phrase “to do no evil and practice virtue” to describe the values that should be taught by Nintendo games. The “do no evil” saying also has a long history of non-corporate uses.

Image Notes: Angel and devil icons from OpenIcons at Pixabay. Multicolor G from Mizter_x94 at Pixabay.

(Great thanks to Fred Shapiro whose inquiry led QI to formulate this question and perform this exploration. Shapiro pointed to the valuable December 2002 citation. Special thanks to researcher Barry Popik who explored this topic and found a web-page snapshot dated July 17, 2002 in the Wayback Machine containing the motto.)

References

- 1 Internet Archive: Wayback Machine, Web capture date: March 27, 2002, Archive download URL: www.google.com/jobs/great-people-needed.html, Title: Great Jobs at Google. (Accessed at web.archive.org on November 6, 2018) [link](#)
- 2 1990 December 16, The Seattle Times, Move to Level Two – Ho a Hurdle, Dodge a Fireball on the Way to Finding the Spirit of America's Favorite Toy by O. Casey Corr, Quote Page 10, Seattle, Washington. (Newsbank Access World News)
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- 4 2002 December 24, The Daily Record, Commentary: 2002: The year pop-ups went down by Hollis Thomases, Baltimore, Maryland. (Newsbank Access World News)
- 5 Website: Google Blogoscoped, Article title: Paul Buchheit on Gmail, AdSense and More, Article author: Paul Buchheit interviewed by Philipp Lenssen, Date on website: July 16, 2007, Website description: Blog about the search engine company Google by engineer author Paul Buchheit. (Accessed blogoscoped.com on November 6, 2018) (Snapshot taken August 19, 2007 available in Wayback machine) [link](#)
- 6 Website: The Sydney Morning Herald, Timestamp on website: 16 April 2008 — 1:56am, Article: Don't Be Evil or don't lose value?, Author: Asher Moses, Website description: Newspaper based in Sydney, Australia, (Accessed smh.com.au on November 7, 2018) [link](#)
- 7 2011, In the Plex: How Google Thinks, Works, and Shapes Our Lives by Steven Levy, Chapter 3: Don't Be Evil: How Google Built Its Culture, Quote Page 143 and 144, Simon & Schuster, New York. (Google Books Preview)

📅 November 7, 2018 👤 quotersearch 📁 Marissa Mayer, Sergey Brin 💎 Amit Patel, Hiroshi Yamauchi, Marissa Mayer, Paul Buchheit, Sergey Brin, Stacy Sullivan

