

GROUCHY GEEK
By Brent Schlender



Is Google Spinning out of Control?

The search giant launched two ambitious alliances in as many weeks. I'm not convinced it can pull either of them off.

GOOGLE IS A COMPANY convinced of its own brilliance and its clear vision of the future. Being a hotbed of Mensa members will do that to you. As will stumbling early onto an obscenely lucrative business model. The same thing happened to a company called Microsoft.

But that doesn't mean that the fundamental rules of the universe don't apply—immutable things like Newton's gravity or Murphy's Law. I bring this up because Google has just announced two extraordinarily ambitious strategic gambits in the span of a week, and I'm not convinced that it can pull either of them off.

First the company announced OpenSocial, a hasty attempt to smother social-network phenom Facebook by pulling together an alliance of more than 50 of that upstart's peers and competitors. The idea is twofold: to make it easier for software developers to build universally compatible applications and to open up social websites to newfangled forms of targeted "social advertising," something Facebook actually started offering the next week.

Then Google took the wraps off something even bigger: a grand plan to redefine the cellphone. Through the so-called Open Handset Alliance, Google will provide software and programming protocols for others to employ in building a new class of smartphone handsets and cellular information services. Once again, the unspoken goal is to create handheld billboards for blasting even more ads at us.

Those initiatives are both what Silicon Valley calls "platforms"

—standards for independent developers to write programs that extend the utility of a device or service. Ever since Microsoft and Intel defined the architecture of the PC, establishing a platform has been the holy grail of ambitious high-tech companies.

But in reality there aren't that many genuine computing platforms around, because it is extremely difficult to design and support them in a way that pleases all constituencies. Apple has managed to establish its Macintosh platform by keeping the options for independent developers rather narrow—application

software and computer peripherals only—and is being extremely careful as it turns the iPhone into a genuine platform. Microsoft, which has huge built-in advantages because it has by far the most experience with platforms, has been working for more than a decade with only mixed success on its Windows Mobile platform for handheld computers and smartphones. This kind of software is hard.

As capable as Google is, the company has never really masterminded a platform before. And there's

a whiff of Tom Sawyer to these strategies; Google is trying to get its partners and the open-source software community to do a lot of the heavy lifting.

It all sounds great, especially if you don't think about how much harder it will be to avoid the relentless barrage of advertising sure to come. But as even Microsoft could tell you, neither platform gambit is a sure bet. Google doesn't seem to take into account the most fundamental rule of high tech: Don't mistake a clear view for a short distance. ■

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HOLY GRAIL
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