



# Book What Would Google Do?

Jeff Jarvis  
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## Recommendation

Google is the world’s most widely used search engine. Its users conduct hundreds of millions of searches daily, many pursuing links from corporate ads. Each time you click on a company’s paid link, Google makes money. Already one of the best-known corporations on the planet, Google continues to grow tremendously as it sets the paradigm for booming Internet commerce. Author Jeff Jarvis explains what makes Google and other successful Web companies tick, and what your company can learn from its strategic concepts. He explains how to use a set of Internet business axioms he dubs the “Google Rules.” *BooksInShort* finds (with little searching) that Jarvis provides an essential corporate road map for this era of radical change.

## Take-Aways

- Google offers a valuable example of how to survive and prosper in the Internet age.
- Everyone, from corporations to governments, and from nations to individuals, must find new ways to evolve in the Google era.
- To plan your future business activities more effectively, ask: “What would Google do?”
- When you do this, which amounts to reverse-engineering Google to fit your needs, you are looking for new ways to understand a world in flux and to see it “as Google sees it.”
- Firms and industries can stay viable by heeding the “Google Rules.”
- The rules say to focus on your customers. Cede control to them and interact. Be open and collaborate with them so they become invested in your products.
- Be “searchable” so consumers can find you. Appreciate the power of a niche market.
- Connect. Be transparent. Build networks. Draw customers with free offerings.
- Don’t bog down with inventory and “stuff.”
- Do what you do best and link to the rest.

## Summary

### A Searching Question

Google sets the pace of business in the Internet age. *The Times* of London calls it “the fastest growing company in the history of the world.” When pondering how to proceed in this exciting, confusing, often counterintuitive era, pose this practical question: “What would Google do?” or “WWGD?” for short. And don’t ask only about Google. Other Internet pioneers also are transforming business and society, including YouTube (which Google owns), Facebook, Craigslist, Wikipedia and Amazon. These Web trendsetters are changing all the old rules. Now:

- **Customers call all the shots** – They can gang up online to make the largest corporation quickly change products, operations and policies they dislike.
- **People are in instant touch with one another** – They can form groups immediately to support or oppose institutions.

- **Selling to the masses is a moribund tactic** – Today, niches rule.
- **Marketing is passé** – Don't try to sell to customers; try to converse with them.
- **Your products are no longer just yours to control** – To make a profit with your merchandise or service, collaborate with your customers.
- **Connections matter** – Open networks and the platforms they are built on – such as Google – create value by connecting people to information.
- **Companies must be open and transparent to endure** – “Owning pipelines, people, products or even intellectual property is no longer the key to success. Openness is.”

“It seems as if no company, executive or institution truly understands how to survive and prosper in the Internet age. Except Google.”

Google's corporate philosophy suggests ways to cope with these new realities:

- “Focus on the user and all else will follow.”
- “It's best to do one thing really, really well.”
- “Fast is better than slow.”
- “You can make money without doing evil.”

“Companies will no longer grow to critical mass by borrowing massive capital to make massive acquisitions...Instead, they need to learn from Google and grow by building platforms to help others prosper.”

While these ideas are illuminating, watching Google in action reveals more. Whenever you ask, “what would Google do?” – which amounts to reverse-engineering Google to fit your needs – you are looking for new ways to understand a world in flux and to see it “as Google sees it.”

Google has earned its spotlight. In 2008, it was responsible for 71% of all U.S. Web searches and 87% of all Internet searches in the U.K. By then, Google already “controlled 69% of online ad serving” and “24% of online advertising.” It is the world's leading brand.

“Google is not just a company. It is an entirely new way of thinking.” (Chris Anderson, author of *The Long Tail*)

Though AOL and Yahoo were dominant only a few years ago, they are now musty and fusty. They play by the old standards, tightly controlling distribution and content. They overspend on marketing to retain customers, using tactics that are quickly becoming obsolete.

Yahoo is the “last old-media company,” in contrast to Google, the “first post-media company.” Google, the ultimate network and platform, eschews Yahoo's portal approach. It does not wait for customers to come to it; it goes wherever they are – all over the Web. Approximately one-third of its revenue, some \$20 billion in 2008, does not come from Google.com itself, but from ancillary Google sites.

## Cede Control to Your Customers

One vital rule of the new interactive era is that if you let people take control, they will. But, if you try to control people, you will lose them. That's why smart companies empower their customers.

“The Internet is a platform, as is Google, as are services such as photo site Flickr, blogging service WordPress.com...and the business software company Salesforce.com. A platform enables.”

Dell Computer learned this the hard way. Dell's quality and service began to suffer in the mid-2000s. Bloggers worldwide started posting thousands of diatribes and warnings about its machines. When a *Houston Chronicle* reporter asked Dell to respond, a company spokesperson said that if people want to communicate with Dell, they should do so at its Web site (and on its terms). That only made things worse.

“Distribution and aggregation is the yin-yang, push-pull of the distributed Web: You want to be distributed, then aggregated and then distributed again. You want to be found.”

Soon, Dell was in big trouble; its share price plummeted. Finally getting the message, the company sent technicians to fix the computers that provoked bloggers' complaints. Then, it started its own blog, Direct2Dell, and created IdeaStorm, a Web site where people could suggest ways it could improve its products and service. Dell spent \$150 million in 2007 to improve its customer-support call centers. It began collaborating with customers instead of trying to control them. By doing so, it vastly improved its operations and turned negative posts into positive ones.

“Banking is the ultimate middleman business, pooling money and need and profiting on the connections...The Internet is already disintermediating the industry by making direct connections.”

Today, smart companies know that fault-finding customers are their best friends. Find out what your customers are saying about your business. Go to Google.com and search your company's name, the names of your products and even the names of your senior executives. Do a similar search on blog search engines, such as Icerocket and Technorati. Check out the microblogging platform Twitter. Visit Facebook to see if any groups exist that support or oppose your firm.

“Stuff is just so last-century.”

Use e-mail to contact individuals you find online who are critical of your company. Thank them for their criticism. Explain that such negative reporting alerts you to problems and helps you improve. Develop a company blog where you and your customers can discuss and, perhaps, resolve problems. Get the CEO to participate. To transform angry customers into partners who can help you change for the good, establish respectful relationships with them. Involve them in all aspects of your operations, including product planning.

“Google is changing our societies, our lives, our relationships, our worldviews, probably even our brains in ways we can only begin to calculate.”

The applicable marketing standards for this newly emerging world are called the “Google Rules,” and they suggest making the most of niches, connections, platforms, links, networks, openness and transparency. The Internet gives your company the remarkable ability to maintain direct, immediate contact with its customers.

“[The Pew Internet and American Life survey] said back in 2004 that 53 million Americans had used the Internet to ‘publish their thoughts, respond to others, post pictures, share files and otherwise contribute to the explosion of content online.’ The writers are starting to outnumber the readers.”

Use that capacity by applying these rules:

- **“The link changes everything”** – People in different locations worldwide can converse through blogs. Users can conduct Google searches for discussion threads they want to join. On the Internet, everything is now “two-way and collaborative.” No intermediaries necessary. “Link and search” connects everyone.
- **“Join a network”** – As Internet networks add connections, they become more valuable. Due to its searches, “Google is the chief agent of that value creation.” Google and other savvy Web companies minimize user costs and, thus, spur growth. This contrasts with old-style networks, like cable TV and phone companies.
- **“Think distributed”** – The traditional centralized approach (using catalogs, stores, dealerships and Web sites to pull in customers) is out-of-date. Google uses a distributed approach; that is, it “goes to the people” wherever they are online. Think of your Internet site “as a means” for reaching customers.
- **“If you’re not searchable, you won’t be found”** – Your company’s Web page doesn’t need to be fancy or complex. Make it as simple as possible to understand and navigate. Most people will get to your Web site via a Google search, so set it up to answer any questions quickly. Provide “product details and support.”
- **“Your customers are your ad agency”** – Traditional companies rely on advertising and marketing to sell their products. Why not get customers to handle these functions themselves? Word-of-mouth is the best advertising by far. If you can communicate directly with your customers online via blogs and so on, you don’t need to worry about advertising. Google’s ad budget is almost nothing.
- **“Small is the new big”** – The Web provides a platform for the smallest entrepreneurs to build viable businesses. Blog software lets anyone become a member of the media, so “the economies of scale must now compete with the economies of small.”
- **“The mass market is dead – long live the mass of niches”** – Big companies tend to think of consumers as undifferentiated members of masses. Now, they must try to learn how to reach individuals who form special networks or leave their usual boundaries to zoom around the Web, Google searching for the products and services they want. Consumers can tap into the Internet’s vast information to fit their own dictates and desires. Choice is crucial. Add up millions of individual options and you have a mass audience made up of niches. In 2008, people “watched 10 billion videos a month online.” One by one, these videos don’t rival the Super Bowl for viewer attention. But together, they swamp the Super Bowl’s viewership. Focus your marketing to aggregate the people you draw individually. That’s how Google handles its advertisers. It doesn’t charge them for the numbers of eyeballs (masses). It charges them for clicks (interested niches).
- **“Atoms are a drag”** – Cut back on the physical “stuff” your business amasses. That’s Amazon’s approach. Even though it is a huge online retailer, it keeps inventory to a bare minimum. It has no stores for which it must pay rent. It does not own its shipping infrastructure. It operates efficiently and passes on an “Internet dividend” in the form of lower prices to its customers, so they buy more.
- **“Free is a business model”** – You don’t always have to charge your customers for the products and services they want. Google does not charge for searches, but its searches have great value. Google, the primary online search engine, makes its money by charging advertisers for access to its audience. *The New York Times* formerly charged for some of its online content, but it realized greater reader and advertiser acceptance by eventually making its full Web content available for free.
- **“Listen”** – Google believes in data. It interprets its users’ actions to decide how to operate. For example, rather than employing a focus group to determine the best color for a Web page, Google creates an “A/B test” by placing alternate colors on separate Web pages to see which one gets the most attention. Use the Internet to learn what your customers think. Heed the messages their actions express.
- **“Make mistakes well”** – Be honest. Admit your mistakes and learn from them. “Corrections enhance credibility.” When bloggers accused Reuters of publishing an altered photo, Reuters checked into the problem, fired the photographer who doctored the photograph, set up antitampering safeguards and then thanked the bloggers who set it straight.
- **Collaborate** – Open your operations to encourage collaboration with your customers. Let them tell you what they want from your products before you design and produce them. If you involve your customers in planning your merchandise, they will “take ownership” of the process and goods you subsequently produce. Michael Dell calls this the “co-creation of products and services,” and it shapes Dell Computer’s business model. He adds, “I’m sure there’s a lot of things that I can’t even imagine, but our customers can.”

## Using “Googlethink”

Drawing from Google’s experiences and expertise, and using the Google Rules could have a big impact on many different industries, for example:

- **Newspapers** – Since they are losing readers, newspapers should focus on building Internet links, not on content alone. Without links, content serves little purpose. Who knows it is there? Newspapers should go fully digital. Blogs reached 57 million people in 2006, more than the 50 million people in the U.S. who bought daily newspapers in 2008.
- **Publishing** – Publishing also needs a makeover. Perhaps people would read more books if more volumes were digital or multimedia. Google believes in books. It is scanning books to make them searchable. Once books are online, readers can access them and learn about their content. This could spur book sales.
- **Restaurants** – If you run a restaurant, perhaps you should survey your customers after they eat to find out what they liked and what they didn’t like. Make the changes they want and they’ll come back. Be sure your menu and information is posted on every possible site that potential patrons might see; be very searchable.
- **Utilities** – Google is changing utility companies’ business model with its “RE<C” (“renewable energy cheaper than coal”) initiative to research cheap energy.
- **Airlines** – Once airlines offer Wi-Fi services, passengers going to the same destination will be able to connect and socialize in the airport and even on board. This could decommodify airline travel. Passengers might end up choosing airlines and flights based on the opportunity to network and socialize.

“The search engine is going to control the planet.” (author Paulo Coelho)

In fact, the “Google-ification” of a wide variety of institutions and industries could revitalize them for the 21st century.

## About the Author

**Jeff Jarvis** runs Buzzmachine.com, a blog about the media and the Internet. He was founding editor of *Entertainment Weekly* and teaches at the City University of New York’s Graduate School of Journalism.

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