

Google Hopes Web Surfers Will Ride their Wave

Michael Liedtke

SAN FRANCISCO - Google Inc. is hatching a new species of e-mail and instant messaging, but the Internet search leader first wants the hybrid service to evolve even more with the help of independent computer programmers.

The free tool, called "Google Wave," runs in a Web browser and combines elements of e-mail, instant messaging, wikis and photo sharing in an effort to make online communication more dynamic. Google hopes Wave simplifies the way people collaborate on projects or exchange opinions about specific topics.

Google offered the first glimpse of its latest offering Thursday during the Mountain View, Calif.-based company's annual conference for software developers who build programs on top of its services. The rest of the Web-surfing public won't be able to hop on Google Wave until later in the year.

By the time Wave rolls out for everyone, Google hopes independent programmers will have found new ways to use the service.

Among other things, Google is counting on outsiders to figure out how to weave Wave into the popular Internet communications service Twitter, social networks like Facebook and existing Web-based e-mail services, said Lars Rasmussen, a Google engineering manager.

Rasmussen and his brother, Jens, helped build Google's online mapping service, which sprouted a variety of unforeseen

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uses after its 2005 debut because of the ingenuity of external programmers.

Having learned their lesson from the mapping experience, the Rasmussens wanted to give developers ample time to tinker with their newest creation before unleashing it on the rest of the world.

The Rasmussens broke away from Google's mapping service in 2006 to concentrate on building a service that would enable e-mail and instant messaging to embrace the Web's increasingly social nature. They contend e-mail hasn't changed that much since its invention during the 1960s.

"We started out by saying to ourselves, 'What might e-mail look like if it had been invented today?'" said Lars Rasmussen, who worked on Wave in Australia with his brother and just three other Google employees.

Wave is designed to make it easier to converse over e-mail by providing tools to highlight particular parts of the written conversation. In instant messages, participants can see what everyone else is writing as they type, unless they choose a privacy control. Photos and other online applications known as "widgets" also can be transplanted into the service.

The service could easily accommodate advertising like Google's 5-year-old e-mail service already does, but Lars Rasmussen said it's still too early to predict how the company might profit from Wave.

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