

Google, Microsoft spar over search results quality

Google is accusing Microsoft Corp. of cheating as the two duel for Internet search supremacy, but Microsoft denies the charge, saying it's just using all the tools available to lessen its rival's dominance.

The dust-up between the two companies that process much of the world's search requests grabbed the spotlight Tuesday at an event sponsored by Microsoft about the future of Internet searches. Microsoft's practices have even wider implications now that its technology powers Yahoo Inc. searches in the U.S., Canada, Australia, Brazil and Mexico.

Matt Cutts, the head of Google's Web spam team, said the company noticed last year that Bing was returning search results that seemed a little too close to Google's own - especially for obscure, misspelled queries.

Google Inc. suspected Microsoft's Internet Explorer Web browser and various toolbars and plug-ins were feeding information back to Microsoft that would help Bing's results become more Google-like.

And so, Google laid a trap. The company made a list of gibberish or obscure search terms and manually linked them to unrelated websites. Then, 20 Google engineers took home laptops loaded with Internet Explorer, searched Google.com for those terms and clicked on the artificial results. Soon after, searching for the same odd terms on Bing would call up the same odd results.

Cutts likened the trap to a mapmaker drawing a fake street or the Yellow Pages adding a fake name to its directory to flush out copycats.

The "Bing Sting" was also detailed early Tuesday on the Search Engine Land blog. Harry Shum, Microsoft's corporate vice president for Bing, responded during a panel discussion with Cutts at the San Francisco event, which was streamed over the Internet.

"It's not like we actually copy anything," Shum said. "We learn from customers who are willing to share data with us, just like Google does."

That data include not only the searches people type into Bing, but also into Google, and what links they click on. The information can be used to fine-tune Bing's own search results. And that sort of "collective intelligence," Shum said, is how the Web is supposed to work.

Cutts said Google doesn't use people's behavior on Bing the same way.

"I want to emphasize that we learn from our customers, our customers' data," Shum

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said. "Do you mean Google owns the data because (people) use Google's search engine?"

In a blog post, Shum called Google's trap "a spy-novelesque stunt."

Cutts and Shum traded jabs about whether people read the fine print when installing the Chrome or IE browser software that explains what Web surfing information is fed back to the company.

When the discussion moved on to the problem of increasing spam pages and low-quality content online, Shum blamed Google for rewarding the owners of such pages with advertising dollars.

Cutts said Google manually blocks spam pages regardless of whether they carry Google ads but wants to find a technology solution for the problem instead of picking off useless sites one by one.

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AP Technology Writer Michael Liedtke in San Francisco contributed to this report.

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