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## Google going vertical

### Commentary: Using communities to enhance search results

By Bambi Francisco, MarketWatch

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**SAN FRANCISCO (MarketWatch) -- As Google's algorithms do what humans can't -- scale -- community-based searches seemed like something Google would not be interested in.**

After all, communities are made of people who tend to be fickle, slow and inherently lazy. They can't handle or process what Google's machines can do.

Yet, Google (GOOG) is harnessing communities with Google Co-op, a concept that lets users contribute their knowledge and expertise to improve search results for everyone. Google also announced, on Wednesday, Google Desktop 4 and Google Notebook, which allows people to share their notes about their searches.

When I asked Google CEO Eric Schmidt what was the most exciting product launch in the last year, he said "Google Co-op."

In his words: "It's a powerful idea" because it gets people to help Google structure the data. Through a co-op, "user-generated data becomes part of the answer," Schmidt said.

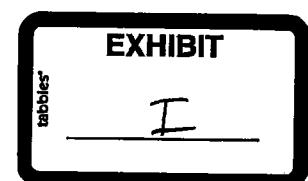
What's more, Google doesn't have to do anything. "Best part of a co-op is that it shows up without us asking." The idea behind Google Co-op, Schmidt said, is that users contribute to create rich resources of information across various topics. It's a lot like Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia created and edited by users, he said.

These topics or verticals will be formed as a result of the communities creating them. In his words: "There'll be more verticals."

Community-based searching has been gaining a lot of attention of late.

I recently wrote about PreFound, Plum, Jeteye and Kaboodle. All these services are trying to get communities to aid in giving people better results for their searches.

Google's Co-op certainly shows that even Google -- which thrives on building the best technology -- believes in the power of humans.



I think this is a brilliant idea for Google to tap into the more arcane searches. Among the digerati, these searches are called the "long tail." Getting to the long tail of searches, the results of the most convoluted or obscure search queries, is something that humans can help with.

"Machine algorithms aren't good at it," Alan Eustace, senior vice president of engineering at Google, said to me.

"Great," I said. "Humans 1, machines 0."

Eustace gave me a little smile, with a look that said, but it won't be for long.

"For the time being, the human judgment is still much better," he said.

So, how does Google Co-op work and is this Google's foray into community-based searching? For that I spoke with the lead product manager, Shashi Seth. Seth said that yes, indeed, Google Co-op is the search engine's push into community-based searches.

So, how does a community get involved? This is how Google's Seth explained it. First, if you want to participate, go to [Google.com/coop](http://Google.com/coop). Sign in and create a profile and a label. For instance, if I want to make a page about travel in Napa, I might label it "Travel in Napa." Then, I could put all sorts of information in that page. (For anyone who read my column about PreFound, the idea is the same. PreFound allows people to be Featured Finders to create pages about topics. In this way, anyone who wants information about that particular topic can leverage the work of that particular Featured Finder.) In many ways, Google's Co-op is the same thing.

If I want to create a page about Hawaii and throw in a bunch of information from searches I had conducted in the past, I can create a page and label it Hawaii. Others can contribute to that page and others can subscribe. The more subscribers, the more relevant my page becomes.

### **Notebook**

Google Notebook also harnesses the community by letting people share their search results. If you're searching you can throw your search results -- links and images, etc -- into a notebook. Others can share in contributing to that notebook. And, you can make that notebook public.

Again, this idea is similar to the companies -- Jeteye, Plum, etc. -- I've been writing about.

The question is, is Google the environment that motivates a community to get involved? It may just be a social network. When I asked Schmidt about News Corp's MySpace and the power of social networks, he said that these social networks don't make money. Google would like to find a way to help them make money. "Does that mean Google has to partner with a social network?" I asked. "How does that work?"

He gave me that Schmidt smile -- a nice warm one he seems to easily give regardless of his mood -- with a look that said to me: "I'm staying reticent."

Rather he said, "You can figure it out." I guess I can figure it out.

Google has moved into community-based searching, which I've thought a compelling idea. Communities are formed in social networks, like MySpace.

MySpace wants a search engine. Is there a connection or partnership in the works?

We'll see. ■

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