

Brief Thoughts on a Google Ombudsman and User Trust

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Despite significant strides toward improved public communications over the years, Google is still widely viewed -- both by users and by the global community at large -- as an unusually opaque organization.

Google does provide a relatively high level of communications -- including customer support -- for users of their paid services. And of course, there's nothing inherently unreasonable with Google providing different support levels to paying customers as compared to users of their many free services.

But without a doubt, far and away, Google-related issues that users bring to me most frequently still relate to those users' perceived inability to effectively communicate with Google when they have problems with Google services (usually free but frequently paid), and these are services that vast numbers of persons around the world now depend upon for an array of crucial aspects in their businesses and personal lives. These problems can range from minor to quite serious, sometimes with significant ongoing impacts.

Similarly and related, user and community confusion over both the broad and detailed aspects of various Google policies remains widespread, in some cases not significantly improved over many years.

The false assumption that Google sells user data to third parties remains rampant, fueled both by basic misunderstandings of Google's ad technologies,

and by Google competitors and haters -- who leverage Google's seemingly institutional public communications reluctance -- filling the resulting vacuum with misinformation and false propaganda. Another of many examples is the continuing unwillingness of many users to provide account recovery and/or two-factor verification phone numbers to Google, based on the unfounded fear of those numbers being sold or used for other purposes. Confusion and concerns related to YouTube policies are extremely widespread. And the list goes on ...

While Google's explanatory documents have significantly improved over time, they often are still written at technical levels beyond the understanding of major subsets of users.

Significant and growing segments of the Google user population -- including older and other special needs users who increasingly depend on Google services -- feel left behind by key aspects of Google's user interfaces -- with visual designs (e.g. perceived low contrast layouts), hidden interface elements, and other primary usability aspects of growing concerns and angst.

These and other associated factors serve to undermine user trust in Google generally, with significant negative regulatory and political ramifications for Google itself, not only in the USA but around the world. This is all exacerbated by Google's apparently deeply ingrained fear of "Streisand Effect" reactions to public statements.

It has frequently been noted that many organizations employ an "ombudsman" (or multiple persons fulfilling similar roles under this or other titles) to act as a form of broad, cross-team interface between individual corporate and/or team concerns and the concerns of the user community, typically in the contexts of products, services, and policy issues.

Google has apparently been resistant to this concept, with scalability concerns likely one key factor.

However, this perceived reaction may suggest a lack of familiarity with the wide range of ways in which ombudsman roles (or similar roles otherwise titled) may

be tailored for different organizations, toward the goal of more effective communications overall.

An ombudsman is not necessarily a form of "customer support" per se. An employee filling an ombudsman role need not have any authority over decisions made by any teams, and may not even interact with users directly in many circumstances.

The ombudsman may be tasked primarily with internal, not external communications, in that they work to help internal teams understand the needs of users both in terms of those individual teams and broader cross-team scopes. In this context, their contribution to improved, effective public communications and perceptions of a firm are more indirect, but can still be of crucial importance, by helping to provide insights regarding user interactions, broader policies, and other issues that are not limited to individual teams' everyday operational mandates.

An ombudsman can help teams to better understand how their decisions and actions are affecting users and the overall firm. The ombudsman may be dealing with classes and categories of user issues, rather than with individual users, yet the ombudsman is still acting as a form of liaison between users, individual teams, and the firm as a whole.

There are of course myriad other ways to structure such roles, including paradigms that combine internal and public-facing responsibilities. But the foundational principle is the presence of a person or persons whose primary responsibilities are to broadly understand the goals and dynamics of teams across Google, the scope of user community issues and concerns, and to assist those teams and Google management to better understand the associated interdependent dynamics in terms of the associated problems and practical solutions -- and then help to deploy those solutions as appropriate.

Google's users, the community at large, and Google itself would likely significantly benefit.