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April 10, 2007 01:11:49 PM

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Google Apologizes to Sohu.com for 'Mistake'




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E-Commerce Times
04/09/07 3:09 PM PT

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Though not going so far as to admit wrongdoing, Google has issued a formal apology to the Chinese portal Sohu.com. The move came after Sohu.com accused Google of stealing its Chinese language dictionary and using the data in a tool designed to make inputting of Chinese characters easier for

Google users.

[Google](#) (Nasdaq: GOOG)  has apologized to [Sohu.com](#) after the Chinese Web portal accused the search giant of illegally incorporating its data in a recently released Google tool that aims to make inputting Chinese characters easier.

The tool, called the "Pinyin Input Method Editor," is similar in concept to the autofill function in many [applications](#), which suggests a word or term after a user has typed in only a few letters, based on previous usage. The Google tool suggests Chinese characters after a user has typed in a few strokes. Sohu.com, one of China's largest portals, has accused Google of stealing its Chinese language dictionary.

While not addressing the allegations directly, Google has apologized. "We are willing to face up to our mistake, and offer an apology to users and to the Sohu company," Google says in a statement.

Highly Competitive

It is easy to see how Google might have been tempted to "borrow" the [technology](#), said Professor Usha C. V. Haley, director of the global business center at the University of New Haven and author of the book, *The Chinese Tao of Business: The Logic of Successful Business Strategy*.

"First of all, e-business is a highly competitive industry in China," she told the E-Commerce Times, "and well penetrated by Sohu.com and Baidu." Navigating the marketplace, she added,

can be tricky without a government sponsor, which both Baidu and Sohu.com have.


Then there is the Chinese language itself, which doesn't translate easily into digital format. Web sites with the best designed input method editor -- tools that translate Chinese characters for the Web -- are likely to be the most competitive, she said.


Google was outted by Sohu.com users who noted the same bugs in both systems, Haley said.

"When users would key in 'ping'gong' in Sohu.com, the name of a Chinese comedian would appear, which was a mistake," she said. The same error occurred with the Google tool.

"Google deserved to be rapped on the knuckles. It is ironic, because their motto has been to do no evil, and yet they have been working hand-in-glove with the Chinese government to appease them," Haley charged.

An Overdue Comeuppance?

"China has not cracked down on IP violations as much as it should, so it is interesting to see a high-profile company like Google apologizing for this infraction," echoed Jason Woodruff Galanis, part owner of [Geomas](#). Geomas, a plaintiff in a patent lawsuit against [Verizon](#) (NYSE: VZ) , holds a patent for organizing geographically and topically based information online.

Many firms have accused Google of patent infringement. It was not an uncommon occurrence even before the search giant's acquisition of [YouTube](#) , which is attracting intellectual property lawsuits like a magnet. Among the most notable earlier cases was a suit that Overture launched against Google a few years ago for allegedly infringing its paid placement process. That case was eventually settled.

"Google is both an innovator and an aggregator," Galanis told the E-Commerce Times. "This means Google has plenty of its own proprietary technology, to be sure, but it also fundamentally has had a strategy of aggregating information worldwide and combining it with other information. As part of this 'aggregation' model, Google also has had a historical tendency to 'aggregate' others' technology or [business processes](#) as well."



Bouncing Back


More than likely, Google will bounce back from this episode with little harm done, predicted Bernard Golden, CEO of [Navica](#).

"In this case, Google is likely to get the benefit of the doubt from the broad user community, as it is well respected as an innovator, and most people would think of this situation as an aberration, not a deliberate act," he told the E-Commerce Times. "If it were to happen again, however, there would be a lot less tolerance for it."

It spotlights a growing problem in the high-tech industry, he said: misappropriation of code.

Large companies with thousands of employees may find it difficult to monitor everything they use in their development work, noted Galanis.

"That is why Google and [Microsoft](#) (Nasdaq: MSFT)   have filed so many patents over the last few years, compared to the relatively few numbers in the early years," he reasoned.

This is a good lesson for everyone, Golden concluded. "If a company as smart and sophisticated as Google can have this happen, it's important for every company to look at its products with a keen eye to ensure there's no IP issue present." 

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