Google This

# Preface

In April 2001, I posted the verb *google* to my Word Spy website (http://wordspy.com/). This didn't seem remarkable at the time, since people had been using "Google" as a verb for a while: the earliest usage I found was from July 1998. Then in early 2003 I received an email from Google's trademark lawyer. The message read, in part, "Our brand is very important to us and as I'm sure you'll understand, we want to make sure that when people use 'Google,' they are referring to the services our company provides and not to Internet searching in general." Google, the giant Internet company, was telling me, some guy in a home office, that I was violating their trademark.

Gulp.

More than a little intimidated, I asked for advice from some linguists I knew. Two things happened. First, several people pointed out that you can't trademark a verb, so Google's case was weak. All would be well if I left the word online but included a trademark acknowledgment. Second, news of my plight leaked, and the Internet lit up with rage that a behemoth corporation was trying to stifle a tiny website. *The Wall Street Journal* called. Many other journalists called. For a few days, the glare of worldwide attention shone in my direction. Fortunately, the world has a short attention span and it soon moved on to some other outrage. I acknowledged Google's trademark and they sent me a tote bag as a token of thanks. And if you don't believe this really happened, you can google it.

# Column

Expect to see a lot of changes in Google in the next few months. We plan to have a much bigger index than our current 24 million pages soon. Thanks to all the people who have sent us logos, HTML and suggestions. Keep them coming! Have fun and keep googling!

—Larry Page, Google co-founder, using Google as a verb in 1998

The cartoons in *The New Yorker* are at least as famous as the magazine's celebrated prose, and for good reason. They're pithy, one-panel portraits of our times; socially observant and dripping with irony, but always amusing in a charmingly odd way. A perfect example appeared in a recent issue. It was a simply drawn cartoon that showed two men sitting at a bar. The caption read, "I can't explain it — it's just a funny feeling that I'm being Googled."

Whoa. Not only was a *New Yorker* cartoon referencing Google, every geek's favorite search engine, but it was using **Google** as a verb. For a low-tech literary magazine, this was language on the bleeding edge. Not that the verb form of Google is all that new. It started appearing on Usenet in the fall of 1999 (about a year after Google first revved up its search engine for public consumption; technology types are always quick to "verb" a noun), and the first media references started showing up in 2000. On January 15, 2001, the *New York Observer* ran a story about a specific form of **Googling**: using Google to look for information related to a new or potential girlfriend or boyfriend. (The article was titled, "Don't Be Shy, Ladies — Google Him!") This is also called **Google dating**.

Since then, we've seen a gaggle of new Google words and phrases. (In case you didn't know, the word "Google" itself is a play on *googol* — same pronunciation — which is the number 1 followed by 100 zeroes. It which was coined in 1938 by nine-year-old Milton Sirotta, after his uncle, mathematician Edward Kasner, asked him for a word to describe a really big number.) For example, those looking to waste a few hours can play the online sport of **Googlewhacking**, which involves entering two-word search terms into Google until you find only a single matching site. (One of the first **Googlewhacks** was *ambidextrous scallywags*; here's a winner: *IEEE flibbertigibbet*.) Then there's **Google cooking**, where you enter two or more ingredients, specify one or more recipe URLs (using Google's "site" keyword), and away you go. Here's an example:

"red pepper" "black beans" (site:allrecipes.com OR site:cooking.com OR site:epicurious.com OR site:recipesource.com)

**Egosurfers** will often use Google to search for their own names. This can even get competitive as rivals duel to see whose name gets the most Google matches. This is called a **Google fight**. Then there's **Googlism**, which is what Google "thinks" of you. You can find out by using the Google-based search engine at Googlism.com. Ego stroking aside, getting a good ranking in a Google search can make or break a site, so some not-quite-ethical Webmeisters resort to **Google bombing**, setting up a large number of Web pages with links that point to a specific Web site so that the site will appear near the top of a Google search when users enter the link text. Finally, there's **elgooG**, a search engine that accepts reversed search words and returns matching pages with their layout and text reversed.