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## **Should Microsoft Re-Scroogle Google Search and Gmail for Bing and Outlook?**



By Tony Rizzo , TechZone 360 Senior Editor

Back in November 2012 Microsoft decided to launch what it refers to as its "Scroogled" campaign. The original campaign used the line "Have you been Scroogled" to target users of Google's search engine to inform them that perhaps the links being returned from a Google search, as well as the ads being offered to the searcher, were a tad dishonest in that only ads from paid advertisers were being presented to the user rather than the entire possible set of ads that might be relevant. We covered the various issues back then on the ad serving front. Scroogling has since evolved.

On Sunday March 31, 2013, Google decided to honor Cesar Chavez as a hero of sorts (instead of perhaps the new Pope seeing as it was Easter and all) with one of its Google Doodles. March 31 is supposedly Cesar Chavez Day, and far be it from us to suggest who or what Google should be honoring - we respect whatever it might be from the perspective that it's Google's choice to do whatever it chooses to do. But some people took offense and felt intentionally slighted and suddenly there was a lot of noise from people who were claiming to finally be getting on the Bing search wagon and leaving Google behind. In the grand scheme of things this isn't much more than a few grains of sand blowing around - a full-fledged sandstorm it certainly isn't.

But it reminded us of "scroogling" and Microsoft's attempts to move people over to Bing. Since the end of January 2013 Microsoft has ratcheted up scroogling again, but has now opted to focus its attentions on Gmail and Microsoft's own next generation e-mail system - Outlook.com, which is replacing the old Hotmail system. With a sudden flurry of defections to Bing, perhaps it's time for Microsoft to take advantage of the situation and re-scroogle for Outlook.

Microsoft certainly has plenty of Hotmail users who are moving over to Outlook.com. The process for doing so is in fact painless - though we don't believe Microsoft has yet made it painless enough. Our better half, for example, has heard "rumors" that Hotmail may be going away and has been asking what should be used in its place. Hmm...how many folks don't have a tech kind of person around to take care of it for them and how many of them still haven't figured it out?

In any case, scroogling is now no longer focused on mild potential deceptions on search results, but rather on the privacy issues that surround Gmail. In particular, Google scans every last word any Gmail user writes, or receives as an e-mail. In turn, Google uses what it learns about you in order to - surprise - build Gmail user keyword profiles and target what it hopes are very well-qualified ads to its Gmail users. The message is that Microsoft's new Outlook.com does none of this privacy breaching.

## User Beware

We've used Gmail dating back to its beta days, and we've always known what Google does with what we write and send through the Gmail system - we've always freely chosen to use it even though we haven't always been on board with what might be referred to as a general lack of clarity on the issue from Google. Let's face it - who reads the agreements subscribers sign, where all the details lurk? People just want the e-mail capability right? For the most part this is true, but Microsoft has uncovered a not insignificant number of Gmail subscribers who do care and who do think having every word scanned is a breach of privacy - even if it's a case of user or buyer beware.

Most of these users simply believe Google should be much more transparent about what it does. And of course this is exactly what Microsoft means when it asks "Have you been scroogled?" To better answer that scroogle question, we recently spoke with Stefan Weitz, a 15-year Microsoft veteran and a Senior Director of Online Services at Microsoft, who is charged with working with people and organizations across the industry to promote and improve search and online technologies. Scroogle and Outlook.com are among the things Weitz works on and with.

### According to a 2012 study by Mozaic Group:



71%  
of Gmail users are unaware their email's words are used to display ads



87%  
of Gmail users believe using email content to serve ads is an invasion of their privacy



60%  
of Gmail users said they would consider or definitely switch from Gmail because of this practice



89%  
of Gmail users believe email is private



88%  
of Gmail users believe Google should not use an email's content to deliver ads

A key thing we wanted to know from Weitz is why he and Microsoft believe that it matters to have Microsoft bring attention to the e-mail privacy issues. The answer, Weitz notes, is a simple one: "People care." That is no doubt true. Weitz suggests that over 20 million Gmail subscribers have moved to Outlook.com who can be directly traced to the issue. That 20 million is a rather large number even though it represents a small fraction of the many hundreds of millions of e-mail users that these privacy issues might affect.

A true evangelist, Weitz certainly strikes us as being genuinely committed to being focused on the altruistic end of this entire issue. The Microsoft/scroogle position is that Microsoft truly cares about your privacy and is not interested in exploiting it for commercial gain. We'll leave it to your imagination as to what that implies relative to

Google and Gmail. A study that Weitz points to - one of several that are available on the Scroogled website, offers some interesting statistics, as shown on the left.

Mozaic Group, an independent market research company, was commissioned by Microsoft to drive the study, which used a randomly chosen online panel of 2,000 Gmail users aged 18 and older from across the United States. The participants were not made aware that the survey was commissioned by Microsoft and they were required to use Gmail via a Web browser on their computer at least a few times a month.

The survey numbers are certainly high and certainly favor Microsoft's position, though there was a large 20 to 30 percentage point drop off when users were asked if they would consider switching or would switch from Gmail once they were aware of the privacy issues involved. Weitz points out that the privacy issue extends beyond the Gmail user agreement. "This is the case because Google scans all e-mails, whether they are generated from Gmail or whether they are sent to Gmail from a different e-mail system. A Hotmail or Outlook user certainly hasn't signed any user agreements to let Google scan e-mails. Nor is there any way for an external user to opt out of having e-mails scanned, short of never sending e-mails to Gmail accounts."

It's an interesting scenario.

The Scroogle site has also created an online petition visitors can sign demanding that Google cease the practice. Well, good luck with that of course, but as we write 116,895 people have signed it.

Is all of this much ado about nothing? There is so much personal information available online in this day and age - and so much of it freely offered up by most users through our social networks - that it is not particularly difficult to assemble a deep profile on just about anyone. Is it really harmful that Google scans your e-mails and presents you with the occasionally useful ad or service?

The flip side of the coin that Microsoft adheres to - at least for Outlook and for Bing - is that privacy matters. The flip side for users is that perhaps in a world where so much is indeed made available and findable, it makes sense to make just a little less of it so easily available. If these privacy issues are a real concern for you, Outlook clearly offers an alternative e-mail harbor.

Buyer beware. You've been warned. If you are indeed [Scroogled](#) it's no one's fault but your own.