

Be a fool for Google

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On April 1, 2004, Google made two announcements. One was a job-listing recruiting engineers for a "Google Copernicus Hosting Environment and Experiment in Search Engineering (GCHEESE)" lunar outpost. The other was the launch of a new email product which it called Gmail. Given the date, no one took either seriously. Like the increase in the price of SA petrol, Gmail was for real.

The online environment is a perfect platform for Google's tradition of benign hoaxing, because we have come to expect dramatic and unusual changes in technology.

Much of what they conjure up to spice up our April Fool's Day has a ring of truth.

In 2000, the year Google was launched, they announced the discovery of a new time-saving search technology that would be able to read the mind of the person using the search engine. MentalPlex would in effect eliminate the step of typing in a search query because it knew in advance what the user was looking for.

We all know that fortune tellers use very little in the way of mystical powers to divine the workings of our subconscious. Most of what they conclude is due to cues that we give away when we interact with them. Ironically, Google has employed this method in predicting what a user is going to search for, offering up alternative sources of information on a topic that is related to the one that we initially looked for. Google has become a mind-reader.

Google's online advertising products – Adsense and Adwords – are based on the principle of displaying products related to a users original search term on the results page. For example, if you searched for dogs, you might be offered the services of a South African dog psychologist.

For some reason, Google did nothing in 2001 and 2003 to fool the gullible amongst us, but in 2002 they spun a fantastic yarn involving the system they use to rank web pages.

Google declared that they used the common grey pigeon (Columbia Livia) to sort through the millions of pages on the web. Pigeons, because of their unique ability to distinguish between different objects were trained to peck on a rubber-coated steel bar when they recognised a relevant result. The ranking of that page would increase every time a pigeon struck the bar. Pages with the most pecks would appear at the top of the result's page.

The pigeons are a metaphor for us. The more times we hit on a page the higher its ranking becomes. In case you haven't realised, you work for Google.

In 2005, as an aside to the success that they enjoyed with their very real Gmail, they introduced GoogleGulp, an "autodrink" that could increase the intelligence of the search engine user through DNA analysis and subtle adjustments to neurotransmitters.

Probably intended as a parody of the method of marketing employed to broadcast the use of Gmail – Gmail is by invitation only – GoogleGulp could only be obtained by handing over the cap of a GoogleGulp to one's local grocer.

Last year Google announced that it had a way of finding love online. Online dating has been around since the web began but GoogleRomance offers something different: "thematically appropriate multimedia advertising throughout the entirety of your free date" (which you receive courtesy of Google once you find the love of your life).

What will they do this year?

Google has begun greening in earnest by installing photo-voltaic cells on their roofs to subsidise their massive energy use. Perhaps they'll dupe us with tales of extraterrestrial power sources or pigeons on treadmills?

For those of you who enjoy a simpler geeky prank, try swapping the keys around on your co-workers' keyboards or removing the balls from their mouses (!)