



## Brand Anarchy, Compliments of Google SideWiki

by [Chris Copeland](#), 12 minutes ago

If you walked out of your home to find graffiti on the outside, what would you do? If you got to your office building to find more of the same, but from different "artists," how would you react? Regardless of the quality or spirit of the message, your initial reaction would likely be violent to find your personal property defiled, your professional workplace violated. Now, imagine if the suggested course of response was to not cover it up, but rather to add your own graffiti to the wall.

Your emotions would then be of outrage, right? Well, let me introduce you to the business conundrum that is Google SideWiki.

Debuting to industry fanfare less than a month ago, the toolbar application allows any user to "tag" opinions about any Web site for other toolbar users to see. In one recent case, a pharmaceutical manufacturer witnessed the proclamation that its product made a man's arm fall off. In other examples, brands have watched competitors attempt to siphon off traffic through covert messaging and mentions of alternatives to such poor products. Many savvy Internet marketing professionals have taken to the Web to show how SideWiki can be gamed by using Google profiles to move comments up and down.

All of this speaks to the perils of putting a product like this out and then taking a very hands-off approach to its implications. This is far from the first effort in this space to do so, but the biggest difference is that it's coming from Google: the largest publisher on the Web, not some small start-up with no toolbar distribution.

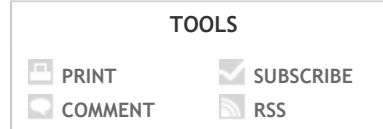
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The path Google is taking with SideWiki is interesting. The product, like many at Google, is the brainchild of engineering. In dealing with questions or concerns about the product, Google's external sales force has been able to provide little insight into the



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rationale and responsibilities from Google. Ultimately, through ongoing discussions, it has been determined that this product accomplishes what Google hoped it would do. It creates a social conversation around a brand. But it does so directly at the brand site, not on Google's site.

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What SideWiki does not do, and what Google seems to be missing, is adding a brand's control to its online presence. No different than a brand's store or corporate headquarters, its Web presence is one of the most important marketing factors existing today. Google has in essence opened a company's Web site up to anyone for commentary and marking up. Google might make the argument that all a company has to do is respond to a comment within SideWiki with its own comment, or answer the point raised by the poster - thus forcing a dialogue between consumers and corporations, and, in effect, forcing the company into a "de facto" blog.

But, some comments may be unanswerable, especially for the most-regulated industry: pharmaceuticals. Pharma companies are required by law to treat any receipt of information that claims a product has caused an effect not listed on the "prescribing information" as a potential adverse event. This requires a great deal of time and effort, including notifying the FDA. If a comment made through SideWiki is spurious, release of a potentially life-saving drug could be delayed or people who could benefit from the drug may decline to use it, possibly endangering their health. Additionally, a pharma company cannot reply to such a comment without assuming continuing liability over every other comment on SideWiki, now and for eternity.

So, where does this go from here? For Internet users at large, there now exists the possibility to hear and be heard about experiences with a brand, good, bad or irrelevant. For brands, it may be another way to stay in touch with consumers, but on someone else's terms. In some cases, there is little that can be done to keep up with comments or even comment oneself without subjecting the brand to further scrutiny and financial implications from alternate sources. Google has stated that a 48-hour review process exists, but when it's graffiti on the wall, the last thing you want is to wait two days for justice to be served.

Historically, Google has struggled to get the social play right. From YouTube to Orkut to Knol, Google has swung for the fences or come late to the game and failed to deliver to outside expectations, either as a true social platform or financially to market expectations. Rarely has Google deviated from the mantra of working for the most relevant answer for the user, but in the case of SideWiki, the engineering wisdom of Google has led the company down a road that is alienating more and more of its advertising base.

In the original launch of the product, Sundar Pichai, vice president of product management at Google, said, "I think we would have failed if people were using it to say 'Obama sucks'. If those are the comments we're surfacing, [Sidewiki] wouldn't be that much different than much of the web. What we're really trying to do is add value from people who really know what they're talking about."

At present, because there is no brand opt-out feature, the product is a borderline reckless approach to giving the Web user a voice closer to an intended source. It tells brands that their equity is subject to the commentary of the few -- a faceless form of speech that is no better, in some cases, than the hooligans who vandalize the side of a wall with spray paint.



This commentary is insightful. I recommend it to others.

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