Book Review

The Google Story: Inside the Hottest Business, Media and Technology Success of Our Time, David A. Vise, Random House, New York, 326 pages, $ 35.00 AUD (Hardcover)
ISBN 1 4050 5371 2

Reviewed by Mark Finn Lecturer in Media and Communications at Swinburne University of Technology

Like Netscape in the 1990s, Google has come to almost represent what it is to be on the Internet in the early years of the Twenty First Century. Indeed, so pervasive is the company’s reach in the online world that the verb “to google” has entered into our common vocabulary, almost without our noticing it.

It seems almost absurd to write the history of a company that was only started in 1999, but such is the pace of development in Internet age that the events of seven years ago are widely considered as historical. As such, Vise’s popularly-focused account of the rise of Google almost seems overdue, and given the amount that has been written about Google over the past few years it is perhaps surprising that this is the first detailed history of the company.

Vise takes a largely chronological approach to discussing the seemingly endless rise of Google, and as such it makes for a good story. The early parts of the book deal with the company’s technical genesis, and describe how Sergy Brin and Larry Page turned PhD research into a lucrative business idea. As befits an account aimed squarely at the popular market, this section of the book contains heavy doses of hero-worship, with Brin and Page being characterised as the young geniuses whose abstract approach to cataloguing information on the Internet would revolutionise the entire medium.

From this point, each chapter focuses on a milestone in the company’s history, with information primarily derived from secondary sources such as media reports and interviews with those associated with the Google founders. For example, Chapter 10 focuses on the decision by America Online (AOL) to adopt Google as their hosted search engine, and reveals some interesting details about the machinations that underlie such decisions. According to the author, the decision caused a major rift between the company’s founders and their newly hired CEO, Eric Schmidt, with the former wary of AOLs insistence upon a multi-million dollar guarantee that Google would deliver what it promised. This chapter is also interesting in that it details some of the mechanisms through which Google sought to generate profits. Key among these was a perpetual auction system where potential advertisers would bid for the right to have their advertisement appear on Google’s search results page. However, unlike many similar systems in operation on the Web, paying top price did not guarantee that the advertisement would appear first in the list; its placement was decided by a combination of how much the advertiser paid and how many users actually clicked on that advertisement.

Similarly, later chapters mix key events in the history of the company with interesting pieces of insider information about the company’s operations. Chapter 12 details how the events of September 11, 2001 helped drive the development of Google News, while also explaining that this service was a result of the company’s “20 percent research rule”. As Vise explains, one of the key aspects of Google’s corporate culture was an agreement that all software engineers would allocate 20% of their time to personal research projects, with the aim being to enshrine innovation as part of normal operating environment. Chapter 15 looks at the
operation of Google Images, while also detailing the development of the company’s acceptable advertising policy. What is perhaps most interesting here is that the types of advertising the company accepts is, according to Vise, based primarily on the personal beliefs of Google’s operators, with advertising for wine being freely accepted while advertisements for beer and spirits are rejected.

Chapter 16 begins the story most readers will already be familiar with: Google’s initial public offering (IPO) and subsequent dramatic rise in share value. While this story has already been told many times before, Vise does manage to include enough fresh details to make it interesting. For instance, while many accounts tend to discuss the rivalry between Google and Microsoft just in terms of their stance on search technologies, Vise argues that it is actually Google’s aggressive hiring practices that are the primary issue, due to the fact that the younger company tends to recruit the same type of personnel Microsoft usually targets.

It is this focus on the business aspects of Google that represents the book’s strongest feature; while it is all too easy to focus on the technology outputs of a technology company, Vise maintains a strong business focus throughout his account. Even though the book portrays Brin and Page as very altruistic in their pursuit of a better search engine, it also portrays them as aggressively profit focussed, willing to go to great lengths to ensure that their company beats out the competition on any given deal.

More importantly, the business focus of the book allows Vise to explore how the rise of Google was inherently tied to the American venture capital market of the late 1990s. While the intellectual audacity of Brin and Page is impressive, the sheer amount of money they were able to extract from venture capital firms for an unproven concept is even more so. This seems to imply that even in the days after the dot.com crash of the mid-to-late 1990s, there were still many investors who saw the Internet as a gateway to enormous profits, with the success of Google perhaps proving them correct.

At the same time, Vise’s account also highlights the importance of academia to the development of Google. In addition to the fact that the search technology behind the company initially began as a PhD project, the book continually points out that Brin and Page have maintained a close association with various academic institutions. The result of this is an uneasy tension between the scholarly ideals of information sharing and wide access and the corporate requirements for profit-orientation and secrecy, and many of the chapters of the book demonstrate this tension quite clearly. Perhaps the best example of this is the discussion of the partial failure of Google’s email venture, Gmail, which was designed to provide email users with the same rapid search and cataloguing facilities as the traditional Google service. While Page and Brin saw development of Gmail as an intellectual and computing challenge, they also recognised the potential for generating profits by targeting advertisements based on the content of the email being read. The resulting backlash over the privacy implications of such a service represented a major publicity crisis for the company, and perhaps indicates some level of naïveté on the part of the founders.

In this respect, the few failures described in the book are perhaps more interesting than the numerous successes, as they serve to illustrate the importance of trust in the new economy. As a company, Google has built its reputation on an anti-establishment ethos of “Don’t be evil”, and in doing so has garnered levels of public acceptance other companies can only dream of. However, as Vise’s book clearly demonstrates, such high levels of public trust can never be guaranteed, and are easily damaged by the slightest error in judgement.