



<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fi-google7jul07,0,5674422.story?coll=la-home-headlines>
From the Los Angeles Times

Google Goes From Web to Webster's

By Dawn C. Chmielewski and Chris Gaither
Times Staff Writers

July 7, 2006

Google is officially a verb.

Google Inc.'s eponymous search engine became a sanctioned part of the English language Thursday, when "google" — with a small "g" — earned an entry among the 165,000 or so terms in the 11th edition of the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary.

The definition: "to use the Google search engine to obtain information ... on the World Wide Web." As in, "Let me google that."

Linguists said google entered the lexicon especially quickly. It reached the pages of the dictionary just five years after its first known public reference as a verb in a New York Post article. Usually, it takes 10 to 20 years for words to enter everyday use, if they make it at all.

Google's speed "is typical for words used on or about the Web," said John Morse, president and publisher of Merriam-Webster Inc. "Those are words that establish themselves in the language the quickest because of the power of the Web to propagate words."

Last month, the Oxford English Dictionary also added the verb "Google" — but with a capital "G" — to its online version.

Branding experts say such currency is hardly a blessing for a corporate trademark. Just ask the makers of Xerox copiers, Band-Aid bandages, Kleenex tissues or Jello gelatin.

"I think it's more of a curse," said Rob Frankel, an Encino consultant who has advised Walt Disney Co., Honda Motor Co. and Sony Corp. on branding issues.

Companies go to extremes to prevent their trademarks from falling into common parlance. A word that's in everyday use no longer enjoys legal protection, Frankel said.

Xerox Corp., for instance, ran an ad campaign imploring people not to refer to every photocopying machine as a "Xerox."

In the interests of safeguarding the trademark, attorneys for Johnson & Johnson advised the healthcare company to change the jingle for its adhesive bandage from "I am stuck on Band-Aid 'cause Band-Aid's stuck on me" to include the word "brand" after the corporate name.

"It goes, 'I am stuck on Band-Aid *brand* 'cause Band-Aid's stuck on me,'" Frankel said. "That is why they did that."

Google risks losing the value of its corporate trademark, he pointed out, if it becomes part of everyday speech.

Google appreciates the problem. In its 2005 annual report to investors, the Mountain View, Calif., company noted that "there is a risk that the word 'Google' could become so commonly used that it becomes synonymous with the word 'search.' If this happens, we could lose protection for our trademark, which could result in other people using the word 'Google' to refer to their own products."

The corporate promotional landscape is littered with examples. "Cellophane," "aspirin" and "escalator" were once trademarks, not just product names.

Peter Sealey, a former chief marketing officer for Coca-Cola Co., said that while working for the soft drink giant, he was obliged to avoid using "Coke" as an adjective, even in internal memos (the "Coke media plan," for example, was *verboten*).

"We had to take elaborate steps to maintain the purity of the trademark," Sealey said.

At least for now, Google has offered a measured reaction to its inclusion in the dictionary, saying it approved of the word's use in references to the Google service specifically, not search engines in general.

Merriam-Webster's Morse said his company is sensitive to concerns about trademark. In its definition of "google," it notes that the verb is derived from Google, the trademark for an Internet search engine.

Merriam-Webster follows the same criteria to determine whether to add any word to the dictionary, he said, whether trademarked or not. The dictionary's editors are constantly monitoring print and electronic media for changing language.

"When we can establish a body of evidence that shows that a word is used in a wide variety of widely used sources over a period of years, then it's eligible for entry into the dictionary," Morse said.

That's how 100 new words made it into the 11th edition. Among the new entrants: "spyware," defined as "software that is installed in a computer without the user's knowledge and transmits information about the user's computer activities over the Internet" and "mouse potato," slang for someone "who spends a great deal of time using a computer."

When the dictionary is published in the fall, "google" will fall between "goofy" and "googly-eyed."

The next entry: "googol," the word from which Google the algorithm-crunching company derived its name — the number 1 followed by 100 zeroes.

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints

Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2006 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

PARTNERS:  