



Stanford eCorner

Data is Apolitical

Marissa Mayer, *Google*

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Product decisions can be based on the company politics. But one cannot argue with facts and stats, and this is the basis, says Marissa Mayer, Google's Vice President of Search Products & User Experience, by which the company bases its decisions. Google's approach is to take the guesswork out of product design, from functionality to shades of color, and they believe in the science of well-monitored and frequent A/B testing.



Transcript

Data is apolitical. I think that - I call this - you know, there's a very interesting feeling around Google. People will come in, like my friends would come in, in, you know, 2000, they would say, "Wow, it's like Stanford with stock options." Because it has a very academic feel. In fact, I had an issue where I would hire people in from other companies, and they were used to giving classic executive presentations where you would get up and say, you know, if you say you had done a user's study, you would say, "The three high points are..." People were having a hard time doing this. This part of it is easy and working well, and, you know, this is a point for future development. And there'd be no data, no numbers at all in this type of executive summary. And, you know, the first thing I would do, is I would sit down and say, "That's never going to fly. There's just no way that that's going to make it through an executive presentation at Google," because, you know, Eric, Larry, Sergey, all the executives want to drill down and they want to hear about the numbers. You can't walk in and say to Larry or Sergey, "Most people are having a hard time finding this, or most people are having a hard time working this feature" because their immediate question is, "How many people did you test, how many people had problems, how was the task, you know, set up?" They really want to drill down into the data. But the interesting property this has is that it makes Google, even as large as we've gotten, I think that the internal politics inside of Google have remained minimal compared to other corporations of its size because we rely so much on the data and we do so much measurement that you don't have to worry, will your idea get picked because you're the favorite, or will someone else's idea get picked because they're the favorite or because they have a better relationship with the person who's the decision maker.

The decisions get made based on data, and that really frees people from a lot of those types of concerns. Like, when I do user interface design, you know, a designer will come to me and say, "Well, there's this green on the interface and there's that green on the interface, or we could lay it out this way or that way." And we don't need to make an arbitrary decision, because we'll just run both of them on the site in what we call split A/B testing, where we give some users one experience and some users the other experience, watch the data and the metrics that come out of that, and we'll be able to scientifically and mathematically prove which one users seem to actually be responding to better. So we're blessed because we have a really large user base and we can do things like that. But I think it also has a really nice property in that the decisions and the way people relate to each other is a lot less political.