Google expands personalization with iGoogle

By Eric Auchard

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MOUNTAIN VIEW, California (Reuters) - Google Inc. is stepping up efforts to allow its users to personalize how they search the Web, moving beyond the one-size-fits-all approach to search it already offers.

Officials told reporters at Google's Silicon Valley headquarters on Monday of moves to allow users to share their own writings, photos, lists and other creative efforts, as well as to give consumers personalized views of the Web through use of their geographical location and search history.

The world's top provider of Web search services is bringing together the more idiosyncratic approach to finding information on the Internet under the umbrella term "iGoogle," the new name for its enhanced personalized home page services.

"We want to personalize the traditional notion of search," Sep Kamvar, lead engineer for the personalization push, told reporters. "I am an eclectic person. But everyone is. We can't go about designing products for the average person."

Reinventing the classic Google.com home page -- with its simple, uncluttered design -- the company is introducing features that range from colorful new Web page designs to helping users publish their own creative content.

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To help users create personalized features on iGoogle, the company introduced "Gadget Maker," which allows any user who knows how to upload a photo and fill out a simple Web form to publish their content without knowing computer coding.

Google introduced seven templates for creating personalized "gadgets" -- publishing features -- that include tools for publishing photos, sending virtual greeting cards or creating personal profiles or lists of favorite songs or films.

"I look at personalized search and I think it is one of the biggest advances we have had over the last couple of years," Marissa Mayer, Google's vice president in charge of search.
in the last couple of years," Marissa Mayer, Google's vice president in charge of search and user experience, told a news briefing.

Google's personalized home page, introduced two years ago, offers users the ability to choose from thousands of regularly updating Web features on one page. Tens of millions of users have signed up so far for the personalized approach to search and they are some of Google's most active users, Mayer said.

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Last week, Google introduced the ability for users to refer back to their personal Web search history over the past several years. The history feature is optional and only for users who give permission to Google to store their Web surfing activity.

Google officials were asked whether users might be shocked to see how much information Google stores on searches.

"Web history tells the user what we (Google) know about you," Mayer replied. "You actually have full insight into what we know," she said, adding that users can delete any personal information they do not want to be recorded from searches.

Google is moving cautiously to avoid the mistakes of a decade ago, when the first wave of Web portals used personalization features on their sites to help marketers target ads rather than giving the user greater control.

"At some point we will turn our attention to advertising," Mayer said, but stressed that iGoogle will remain non-commercial for the foreseeable future.

Google is also introducing a geographic aspect to search results based on the location that users select as their home location on Google Maps.

Users who accept this option will see Google search results that are tailored to their location, so a search for "pizza" will return links to nearby pizza restaurants, not just the most heavily visited pizza sites across the Web.

The company is also expanding the number of countries and languages in which it will offer personalized search services.

This week, iGoogle personalized Web search will be available in 40 countries and 26 languages, up from 22 nations and 15 languages where personalization is now offered, said Jessica Ewing, the product manager for iGoogle.