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Product Review: Gmail

For many years, the Gmail service by Google had an unusual marking on its logo: the small letters “BETA” in the lower right hand corner. Years after the last Gmail invite was sold on EBay, Gmail was still in public beta mode. It seems odd that Google chose to continue labeling such a mature, visible service as beta – most online services rush out of the beta stage to claim the market before a competitor can. But really, the beta label reflects Google’s one fundamental advantage over other web companies: its unending drive to innovate. Beta means that Google doesn’t hesitate to add a feature that will make Gmail better. Beta means that Google keeps thinking about where Gmail will head next. Though the beta label is now gone, Gmail is still as fresh as ever.

The broadest theme of the Gmail experience is that Google really asked themselves, “What could make our users’ lives easier?” (And no surprise, since all of Google’s engineers are avid Gmail users who get one day a week to tinker with the service, if they so choose.) Switching from Yahoo mail, I instantly noticed the focus on user experience. The first thing I notice: Gmail loads about twice as fast as Yahoo. The next: a pop-up window kindly asks me if I want to automatically collect mail from my old account. Then, I see that my mail is organized by conversation, a vast improvement from individual messages scattered across my inbox. All of these features are easy for a programmer to write; they’re little details in the massive structure that is a webmail client. But, what is quality but attention to detail? All of these conveniences really add up to a better product. Comparing Yahoo and Gmail, the same pattern appears again and again: Yahoo has the main features in place, but Gmail adds polish and usability. Both services have spam filters, but Gmail is less likely to put useful email in my spam folder. Where Yahoo loaded an annoying welcome page whenever I logged on, Gmail directed me straight to my inbox.

At this point, it’s appropriate to go over Gmail’s distinguishing features. The most obvious ones lie in the organization category. As mentioned before, Gmail organizes messages by conversation: a string of replies to and from the same group of people will be grouped into one neat package. In addition, Gmail has a very intelligent folder system. Not only does it support folders and subfolders for tracking large amounts of mail, it also allows users to filter messages into folders automatically. For example, I can ask Gmail to sort into a special folder all mail containing photo attachments from my parents.

Gmail’s other unique features can be found under the hood. The service lets power users change a plethora of settings, allowing many productivity-enhancing tweaks. It supports collecting mail from other email accounts using POP and IMAP. Gmail will even let users

forward all messages to a non-Gmail account, something for which Yahoo charges \$5 a month. (I presume that Yahoo is afraid of losing its users, where Gmail is not.) In addition, it is possible to send email under the alias of another account, useful for targeting MIT Mailman mailing lists, which allow only @mit.edu users to post. All of these features make Gmail an ideal hub for messaging, provided the user is willing to do a little work under the hood; this list doesn't even include the many "Google lab" add-ons that allow even more customization.

These features all contribute to my overall impression of Gmail, but something else impressed me even more. This might best be described with a short anecdote: as soon as I arrived at MIT, I was bombarded by many emails a day from the Next House mailing list, a forum for all students living in Next House. Most of the emails were irrelevant, so I filtered them to a specialized folder, and ignored them for the most part. Months later, I notice that a few Next House messages were going unfiltered into my inbox. Not just any messages, either; all of the unfiltered messages were important to my life in some way. As it turns out, Gmail uses semantic methods to highlight important messages and prevent them from being ignored, breaking a user-defined rule if necessary.

As it turns out, I had been oblivious to quite a few such intricacies. After noticing one, I began seeing the others: When I get a string of new messages in one conversation, Gmail opens only the important-looking messages, and renders the others as tabs. If I keep deleting new messages in the same conversation, eventually the entire conversation will be automatically muted. In short, Gmail works so perfectly that I didn't even notice some of its features – they did exactly what I wanted, without any prompting. Now, that's impressive technology.

All that dazzle aside, Gmail really adds up to a better email service. The sum of those little conveniences saves non-trivial amounts of time and frustration – imagine my relief when Gmail warned me about a missing attachment file, an inference based the fact that my email text contained the word "attached". That warning saved me from sending an embarrassing "oops, forgot attachment" follow-up to my professor. There were numerous such cases where Gmail has made my day a little better, with many more to come.