

'More than a chatbot': Google touts firm's AI tech

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'It's important to realize that AI is far more than just a chatbot,' says Kent Walker.

Google's position as king of the search engines is under threat like never before, but the firm's global policy chief told AFP this week it still had the edge over its AI competitors.

Kent Walker played down the idea that viral AI chatbots like ChatGPT could challenge Google's crown, stressing that his firm had spent the past decade integrating artificial intelligence into its products.

"It's important to realize that AI is far more than just a chatbot," he said in an interview on Wednesday in Malaga, southern Spain, where Google is opening its biggest European cybersecurity center.

He said AI would transform the way we conduct science and stressed that anyone who had used Google Maps, Translate, Gmail or [search](#) recently had been benefitting from AI.

"We've been using AI to power search for a dozen years," he said.

"We're finding new ways to use generative AI tools to expand the different ways people can search."

Enter Microsoft

A year ago, the launch of ChatGPT by the California firm OpenAI lodged in the public's imagination the idea of generative AI—computer programs that can generate content with just a few instructions.

Microsoft, already a backer of OpenAI, ramped up its support to the tune of billions of dollars and began sprinkling AI stardust over its search engine Bing.

The early reviews were good and suddenly, for the first time this century, Google seemed to have a genuine competitor.

Google quickly unveiled its own chatbot—named Bard in honor of William Shakespeare—and Walker conceded that rapid advances with chatbots had influenced his company.

"I would say the rise of AI chatbots accelerated our work and expanded popular acceptance of AI in a more visible way, and we have doubled down on our work," he said.

'Always a balance'

But Google is no longer a bold startup. It is a sprawling trillion-dollar global entity with many divisions and stakeholders.

In recent times it has become more notable for its cautious approach to new technology rather than for pushing the boundaries.

And Walker, who joined Google in 2006 and heads its legal and policy teams, chose his words carefully on AI's potential to upend the search engine market.

"It's always a balance because some of these new AI tools are not always as accurate as traditional search," he said.

AI tools like ChatGPT are known to invent details of people's lives, cite fake academic papers or pass off their own creations as fact.

"So we need to make sure to use our traditional experience in search to ground the results in accurate, authoritative information," said Walker.

"So we are blending AI into search—what we call a search generative experience—to have the best of both worlds."

Google's current difficulties go further than competition in the AI space, however.

A high-profile trial in the United States is probing its dominance of the search market.

Among the most damaging revelations has been that Google pays billions to Apple to ensure it continues as the default engine on its products.

Walker was sanguine, though, saying the case has given his firm the chance to show that users choose Google "because they want to, not because they have to".

He said Google worked with other platforms to make it easier for users to find their products.

"We hope the court will agree with this," he said. "We'll probably find out in the spring of next year."

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