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Bad PDF formatting reveals Google Voice numbers

by Daniel Terdiman

Google Voice may not have made it onto the iPhone yet, but the service has still managed to attract more than 1.4 million users.

In a story posted Friday, BusinessWeek is reporting that Google Voice has grown to 1.419 million users, 40 percent--fully 570,000--of whom use the service every day. The information comes from documents in which Google responded to questions from U.S. regulators interested in whether the search giant is improperly blocking calls to phone numbers in specific rural areas of the country.

But while the information about the number of users of the service was included in the documents Google handed over, they were not meant to be made public.

"Though the number of Google Voice customers was redacted in the version that was made public, BusinessWeek reviewed the information in the redacted sections," BusinessWeek reporter Arik Hesseldahl wrote. "We had intended to keep sensitive information regarding our partners and the number of Google Voice users confidential,' Google said in a statement to BusinessWeek. 'Unfortunately, the PDF submitted to the (U.S. Federal Communications Commission) was improperly formatted.'"

Hesseldahl added that subsequently, the FCC has replaced the first letter on its site with one in which the information originally intended to be redacted has been blacked out.

He also reported that another since-redacted section of the documents suggests that Google intends to take its Voice service global and has inked deals with several "international service providers for inputs to Google Voice." However, Google said that no such international services have gotten off the ground so far.

That Google should screw up something so simple as PDF formatting is terrific, from a reporter's perspective. Surely however, its investors, board members, and executives are none too happy with the employee responsible for ensuring that the relevant passages of the documents were blacked out. But, as someone who may not have been too successful at such an operation myself, I shouldn't throw stones.

And in the spectrum of corporate secrets it would have liked to keep to itself, the number of Google Voice users is kind of small potatoes. Somewhere, Larry and Sergey are probably breathing a sigh of relief that that's all that escaped the faulty digital black-out.

So, word to the wise, corporate types: if you have to give the government documents that are going to be made public, pay a little more attention to the way you format your PDFs. A lot could hang in the balance.

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http://news.cnet.com/8301-13772_3-10387365-52.html?tag=newsEditorsPicksArea.0