

Thinking different

Before continuing reading this story I would like you to do a google image search on "google switch" (including the quotes), can you see a (red) pattern emerging? Now have a look at the results on a normal google web search on the same phrase and have a look at the number of hits. Thanks, that was all, please keep this in mind and just read on.

The beginning

This story starts somewhere around august 2006. Having participated in 2 projects together we were drinking some beers while discussing the Dutch school system, the meaning of life and our prospects of the new semester ahead of us. I was already enrolled in a 3D-project in which me and my teammates were expected to model and animate some kind of revolution in public transportation. I thought it was interesting, not something which I could write as passionate about as the project this story is about, but it felt okay at the time. It wouldn't last long.

The 2 other guys I was chilling with in the sun hadn't chosen a project yet. They were ambitious and wanted to start a project themselves, not one offered by the school. They couldn't come up with a good one however and that was actually the whole purpose of all the beer drinking in the sun, to have a brainstorm session about cool things they could do in the upcoming half year.

After about the third beer I decided to throw in this idea I've had on my mind for a couple of months now. The essence of it was that mobile phones sucked in the form they were produced at the time and in my opinion it couldn't be that hard to do it all a whole lot better. In theory that was, it would've been fairly impossible to create an actual device, but by taking current technology and stuff feasible in the nearby future in mind it would be possible to work out a device on paper that was leaps ahead of current phones in terms of usability, interaction and use of technology. About 20 minutes further in the conversation I found myself essentially being forced to leave my current project to team up with them to spend the next couple of months building on this idea.

The project

We decided to go for it and that was a good decision. A good time it was, we got to the bottom of it. Server-side processor power and storage, one massive stylus-less multi-touch screen with just a couple of other 'hardware' buttons, quite ingenious ways for finger-touch text input, a totally new application concept to overhaul all ways of mobile communication, spam-on-demand (not what it sounds like) and a whole bunch of other features and functionality. We named it 'switch' as it would create a switch in how humankind would use and think about cellphones from the moment it was released. We 'created' a device which we all would be happy to use and above all; it was cool as hell!

From the start we wanted to 'leak' some spy-shots of our imagined device on to the internet as a buzz-experiment. Just to see how hard it would be to fool the world (wide web). To make a deeper impression and to be believable we had to use some kind of big company that was capable of actually developing such a device from whose internals we could supposedly leak these pictures. We thought about Apple (an iPhone?), Google, Samsung and some more but we weren't sure if we were good enough design-wise to impersonate any of those companies. As the project continued this dilemma slumbered on without being tackled.

Then the most amazing thing happened. We were in the last couple of weeks in our project and busy rounding stuff up. Making sure we would earn at least a couple of credits, as we hadn't really followed any of the school rules doing this project. On January 9 2007, Steve Jobs took the stage at the 24th Macworld conference to do his annual talk about all the stuff that was going on in Apple Computer Inc. There were some rumors going around about a possible long awaited iPhone announcement so we were very interested in this presentation. Those rumors appeared to be true, Steve Jobs announced THE Apple iPhone. The amazing thing was that it was a lot like our concept, a whole lot! I remember emailing my teammates every 2 minutes while watching the video-stream informing them about which feature Apple also 'stole' from us, the similarities didn't seem to end. They had beaten us on a couple of things however, like the proximity sensor which allows for disabling the touchscreen when you have the phone at your ear, the motion sensor which makes the phone capable of reacting on rotation (We did think of that actually, but we thought it wouldn't feel that intuitive, maybe a mistake on our side?), of course the beautiful esthetic design and probably a lot more.

But we also were amazed about the number of matches between the devices. We really regretted that we didn't leak our insider information as an Apple device earlier, that would've been really something if these things would appear to be true. At first we thought this meant a failure of our project regarding the leakage. It eventually worked out in the benefit of it.

The leak

We decided to leak our pictures in name of a cooperation between Google and Samsung as there was some gossip circling around already about a phone in development by those companies. From now on we would refer to our device as the 'Google Switch' and many people would do the same in just a matter of days after that.

We took a picture of a table with a camera equipped phone and rendered a 3D model of our device over it. We then took a picture of a monitor with that image on it and this way we created two quite realistic looking photos. In the morning of January 3 we sent one picture along with a small description of the capabilities of the pictured device to engadget.com and gizmodo.com, and went off to lunch. When we came back Gizmodo had already posted the shots and Engadget came in second after some confirmation by the other picture, after that it caught momentum fast. By noon it had been posted several times on digg.com, and by the evening it was on its front page. After that things exploded and the 'Google Switch' was all over the internet, thousands of blogs and other sites would write about the Google Switch in the days that followed. One of the pictures even showed up in a national Dutch newspaper. For weeks we saw our creation popping up everywhere, some guy even registered www.thegooglephone.com to host our pictures.

In retrospect

Now, a year and a half later there are still two things that intrigue me about this whole thing. One of those is the we, three ordinary guys, had in essence the same ideas as Apple and could develop something similar as this multimillion-dollar company had. How is this possible? Are we three geniuses? One can say that this concept was 'in the air' and just had to happen right then and there, a logical chapter in the history of cellphones. But why didn't other companies create better devices earlier? Why did this whole industry feel so unsatisfying to us and made us want to start this project. Why did it feel relatively easy to us to do their job much better?

The second intriguing thing is that these same three guys were also able to create this huge buzz. It wasn't hard to create the fake pictures and the description we sent with them weren't that convincing and mind blowing. But the effects were massive. We absolutely didn't expect this outcome when we wrote these emails to Gizmodo and Engadget. This success was probably partly dependent on the great headline Engadget came up with: "Google Switch, a Samsung iPhone killer?". This along with the announcement of the iPhone a week earlier drew a lot of attention to the story.

I think it's cool to realize that millions of people knew and know about this idea we created. Even though people got to know just a small portion of the things we had worked on and a lot of them were very skeptical, this was our idea that received global coverage, we were the ones who thought of the name and worked on the project for a half year determining the shape and form. I think the Google Switch will live as long as the internet, and to have left our small footprint in internet history and doing so with a completely fictional device is something I'm not ashamed to be proud of.

By Egbert Veenstra

This story is written from my point of view, but every individual in our team had equal contributions in this thing so I would like to thank my teammates Sam Baas and Sytse-Jan Kooistra, lots of credits to them!

info@sytsevliegen.nl

sambaas459@msn.com

egbertveenstra@gmail.com