Neeva, the would-be Google competitor, is shutting down its search engine

Neeva, which for a while looked like one of the startups with a real chance to challenge the supremacy of Google Search, announced on Saturday that it is shutting down its search engine. The company says it's pivoting to AI — and may be acquired by Snowflake, *The Information* reported — but mostly seems to believe it failed.

"Building search engines is hard," Neeva co-founders Sridhar Ramaswamy and Vivek Raghunathan wrote in a blog post announcing the shutdown. (Ramaswamy in particular is part of the reason Neeva seemed promising — as the longtime head of Google's ad business, few people are better equipped to know how to build and monetize search than he is.) But Neeva did it, they said. It built a good, competitive search engine. It was actually well ahead of Google in some respects, like swapping 10 blue links for a more visual page and emphasizing human-created information.

But building the search engine was actually the easy part. "Throughout this journey, we've discovered that it is one thing to build a search engine, and an entirely different thing to convince regular users of the need to switch to a better choice," Ramaswamy and Raghunathan continued.

Building the search engine was actually the easy part

I've talked with Neeva's co-founders several times over the last couple of years, and their list of grievances here is long and well-founded. They've had to contend with the

billion-dollar deals Google signs to make itself the default search engine on devices everywhere; the huge “are you sure you want to change?” popups that show up whenever you try to set a new default browser or search engine; the difficulty of finding those settings in the first place; the mess that is the Chrome Web Store; on and on and on. Anyone trying to build a new search engine is fighting a massively uphill battle.

Neeva was also a paid product, as the company tried to prove a business model for search other than ads and surveillance. “Contrary to popular belief,” the co-founders wrote in the blog post, “convincing users to pay for a better experience was actually a less difficult problem compared to getting them to try a new search engine in the first place.” Combine that with a tough economy, and Neeva simply couldn’t see a business path forward.

The timing here is really interesting. Neeva is shutting down at what might be the best moment in two decades for upstart search engines. Users are increasingly fed up with the ad load and subpar results they get from Google, and AI chatbots like Bing and ChatGPT have upended everyone’s idea about how to interact with the internet. Neeva bet on this, too, developing a large language model-based system called Neeva AI that is in many ways more useful than what you’ll get from Bing or Bard. But that wasn’t enough either.

The race to take down Google is still very much on, of course: Bing continues to push hard to gain market share, and Brave recently touted that it now runs completely on its own search stack. Companies like you.com and DuckDuckGo are also trying to re-think the way search works, and using AI to do so. But so far, it looks like Google’s only real competitor is, well, Google.

Neeva’s search engine will shut down on June 2. Going forward, Neeva will be “shifting to a new area of focus,” which seems likely to be LLM-based and related to the Snowflake

acquisition. The company will be refunding users for the unused portion of their Neeva subscriptions, and deleting all user data. “We are truly grateful to our community,” the co-founders wrote, “and we are truly sorry that we aren’t able to continue to provide the search engine that you want and deserve.”

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