



How to Find What You Want on the Web

Searching for something on the Web? Here's how to find it quickly and easily.

BY MIKE ROUFA

In a previous issue, we helped you find the right Internet service provider, or ISP, to host your Web site (see Roufa and Hoffman in “References”). In this issue we focus on search engines—Web sites that offer you the best chance to find information and to market your site to an international audience.

Using search engines to find what you want and to market your site is a complex topic. In this article we'll explain how search engines work and offer tips on using them for your research. In an upcoming issue, we'll discuss how to promote your site on the Web using these same resources.

The Web's greatest asset, unfortunately, also can be its biggest drawback. By providing an incredibly cost-effective way for individuals and small groups to present themselves, their viewpoints, and their products, the Web has the potential to become an unwieldy information wasteland. With this many choices, finding the page you want can be like picking out a needle in a giant stack of needles. Let's take a look at some strategies to help you find what you're looking for.

Strategy 1: Try Guessing.

If you're looking for a specific organization's Web site, you may be able to guess the Web site's name by combining “www,” the organization's name, and one

of the following endings:

- .com = a commercial Web site
- .net = usually an Internet service provider
- .org = a nonprofit organization
- .edu = an educational institution

For example, if you want information on a program of the Soros Foundation, you can type www.soros.org into your browser. This will take you to the home page of the Soros Foundation, where you'll find the organization's list of programs.

Unfortunately, this strategy will get you only so far. For one thing, not all Web addresses are so easy to figure out. If you're looking for the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, you may not guess www.dec.state.ny.us in your first hundred tries. Furthermore, you may be looking for information on a concept as opposed to an organization. Here, www.socialservicesinnewyorkcity.org is unlikely to offer much help.

Strategy 2: Use Search Engines.

The best way to find information on the Web is to use search engines—Web sites that create an index of information available on the Web. All search engines are essentially the same. At their core they are huge databases that contain names, addresses, descriptions, and keywords of Web pages. Each search engine,

however, gathers and presents information differently. If you take the time to understand these differences you can use them to your advantage when you're searching (and, consequently, marketing your site on) the Web.

Active Search Engines

An active search engine is really just a “robot,” a type of software program which continually scours the Web for new pages to add to its database. It does this all day and all night, often by starting with one Web page and then cataloging all of that page's links. You may see computer magazines refer to active search engines as “spiders” or “crawlers” because of the way the software travels through the links of the Web. The most popular active search engines include: Alta Vista (www.altavista.digital.com), HotBot (www.hotbot.com), and Excite (www.excite.com). (See page 13 for a comprehensive list of search engines.)

How do active search engines work? You present a request to an active search engine by typing a couple of keywords, or an exact phrase, into a form on the search engine's Web site. This process is known as “submitting a query” or just “querying.”

When you submit a query, the engine searches its database and ranks all the matches it finds. Say, for example, you're searching for “sustainable development.” Pages that contain both “sustainable” and



“development” appear before those that contain just one of the words. Pages with both words next to each other are ranked even higher. Pages that contain the phrase several times in the document are ranked highest.

The search engine then gives you a list of the first 10 or 25 matches. It also provides a link you can click to see the next set of matches for your query.

This ranking process is very helpful. For example, an Alta Vista query for “sustainable development” returns an astounding 26,327,685 pages, but the ones that are most relevant appear at the top of the list. Even if it had returned only 200 or so, which is an incredibly small number of pages, you still don’t want to have to check every page one at a time to see if it really fits your needs.

Active search engines offer benefits and disadvantages. On the positive side,

they cast a wide net. If you’re not sure what you’re looking for, or you want to find out everything on the Web related to a topic, you might do well to start with an active search engine. That way you’ll be sure to find a wide range of possible returns on your query. On the other hand, because active search engines tend to have larger databases, chances are that an active search engine will provide an overwhelming number of hits for your query when you’re looking for something specific.

Directories

A directory, or passive search engine, is a database of links put together by people instead of robots or software. Thus, passive directories tend to be well organized and highly functional, despite the fact that they’re smaller than their active counterparts.

The undisputed king of Web directories is Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com). In business since the early days of the Web, Yahoo! remains one of the best organized sites. Its database is organized hierarchically, starting with the following headings:

- Arts & Humanities
- Business & Economy
- Computers & Internet
- Education
- Entertainment
- Government
- Health
- News & Media
- Recreation & Sports
- Reference
- Science
- Social Science
- Society & Culture

You can browse through these headings to find the sites you want. Browsing through similar sites is an excellent way to do research, especially if your topic is fairly broad.

This is how I found the N.Y. State Department of Environmental Conservation, in four clicks:

Government to U.S. Government to State Governments to New York

Yahoo! also lets you query its database for keywords or plain text, similar to an active search engine.

In an effort to compete with Yahoo!, some active search engines such as Lycos (www.lycos.com), WebCrawler (www.webcrawler.com), and Infoseek (www.infoseek.com) have added Web directories to their main query pages. You can browse through these links or search the entire Web all from one site. Snap! (www.snap.com) and LookSmart (www.looksmart.com) also combine these features and let you search their own directories and the entire Web simultaneously.

In short, directories tend to be smaller in scope but more focused in the information that they contain. If you know what you want on the Web, use a directory first.

Meta Search Engines

A meta search engine isn’t really a search engine at all in that it doesn’t contain its own databases. Instead, it takes your query, then submits it to several other search engines. The other engines process the query and return lists of sites to the meta engine. The meta engine then ranks these sites according to how many search engines return the same site, and presents the links to you.

These engines can be powerful, but getting good results can be tricky. With an active search engine, you can write specific queries to find exactly what you want, but with a meta search engine you have to rely on how well the meta engine converts your query into the languages of the other engines. This makes them less desirable for very specific queries, but well suited for finding general information. The most well known meta search engines are Metacrawler (www.metacrawler.com), Dogpile (www.dogpile.com), and Inference Find (www.infind.com).

Refine Your Searching Strategy.

Now that you know the difference between types of search engines, you’re

A Comprehensive List of Search Engines

Active

- Alta Vista - www.altavista.digital.com
- HotBot - www.hotbot.com
- Excite - www.excite.com
- GoTo - www.goto.com

Passive

- Yahoo! - www.yahoo.com

Active and Passive

- Lycos - www.lycos.com
- WebCrawler - www.webcrawler.com
- Infoseek - www.infoseek.com
- Snap! - www.snap.com
- LookSmart - www.looksmart.com

Meta

- Metacrawler - www.metacrawler.com
- Ask Jeeves - www.askjeeves.com
- Dogpile - www.dogpile.com
- Inference Find - www.infind.com

All-in-one

- Netscape Netcenter - www.netscape.com
- All-in-one - www.albany.net/allinone



well on your way to choosing the search engine that best meets your needs. Here are some hints to help in your search:

Read the Tips.

Each search engine requires a different language for your queries. If you're searching for "sustainable development in Asia and Africa but not America," you may need to submit a query that looks like this:

*sustainable AND development
AND (Asia OR Africa) NOT
America*

or like this:

*+sustainable +development
Asia Africa-America*

depending on which search engine you use. The only way to know how to write these queries is to read the engine's instructions. You'll find these on a link from the main querying page, usually titled "Tips."

On the other hand, some search engines understand queries in plain English. Sites like GoTo (www.goto.com) and the meta engine Ask Jeeves (www.askjeeves.com) allow you to do just that.

Refine Your Search Often.

Don't waste your time going through hundreds of links from your first search. If the information you want doesn't appear in the first 30 or 40 returned links, try adding a few search terms, or making your search more specific. If that doesn't limit the number of pages returned to you, many sites will let you perform a "Power Search." Such a search lets you select a date range for the results, search only page titles, or create a specific Boolean query.

Another quick way to search for a topic is to find a promising site and check

Any Questions?

Do you have a question or comment you'd like to see covered in future columns? Contact JP Frenza c/o *Nonprofit World*, 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719.

its link page. Almost every Web site has a page of links to similar sites. If you can't find exactly what you want, go to a site that looks pretty close, then see if that site has a link to your first choice. You'll save a lot of time if somebody else has already done the work of finding the site you want. If you're lucky, you could stumble on a search engine or directory geared specifically toward your topic.

Use Several Search Engines.

Each search engine uses different criteria to categorize and store Web addresses in its database. Thus, presenting the same query to more than one engine will often produce very different results and rankings. You can use this to your advantage by picking a couple of search engines and sharing queries between them. If one doesn't provide the results you need, maybe the other will; if neither does, you'll probably need to think of a better way to phrase your query.

Sometimes it's handy to use an all-in-one search page. All-in-one pages let you place your query in the search engine of your choice without having to go to that engine's page. The most popular all-in-one page is Netscape's home page (www.netscape.com), where you can submit a search to Lycos, Excite, LookSmart, Alta Vista, Infoseek, or Netscape's own engine. If you need even more power, check out the all-in-one page at www.albany.net/allinone, where you can choose from a hundred different search engines!

In a Hurry? Try "Low-Bandwidth" Mode.

Some search engines give you the option of using a "low-bandwidth" or "text-only" version of their site. Functionally identical to normal site presentation, a low-bandwidth version is almost all text without the time-consuming graphics and formatting of the normal site. These versions are life savers if you have a slow net connection. They also present fewer graphical distractions as you search. (Don't expect all advertise-

ments to disappear, however. Remember, you use search engines for free, and ads are a search engine's major source of revenue.) You can bookmark these low-bandwidth sites instead of the main pages for easy access.

Leverage Your Knowledge.

Now that you understand what search engines are and how to use them, you can leverage your knowledge when it comes time to register your site. In the next article in our series, we'll discuss marketing your site with search engines. If you have a question or comment you'd like to see covered in future columns, let us know! ■

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. For ordering information, contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

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