

Delivering the goods

There's no doubting Google's power and popularity. Yet few of us use the search engine effectively. Jack Schofield offers some tips

Thursday January 8, 2004, The Guardian

Google is now the world's most powerful website, and if it goes public this year, its young founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, will become extremely rich. Their five-year-old company has already cracked its biggest problem, which is how to make pots of money from selling advertising space without carrying any banner ads. And while there are other places to search the web, most websites are now dependent on Google for a large proportion of their new visitors. The question that drives all but a few commercial webmasters today is: "How do I change my site to make it appear on the first page when someone searches Google?" What is even more impressive is that Google has achieved its supremacy by word of mouth: by delivering what users want. That has helped it retain users' confidence while doing things that might have raised concerns about invasion of privacy elsewhere. For example, Google almost certainly knows more about you than you would tell your mother. Did you ever search for information about Aids, cancer, mental illnesses or bomb-making equipment? Google knows, because it has put a unique reference number in a permanent cookie on your hard drive (which doesn't expire until 2038). It also knows your internet (IP) address.

Google's privacy policy says that it "notes and saves information such as time of day, browser type, browser language, and IP address with each query. That information is used to verify our records and to provide more relevant services to users. For example, Google may use your IP address or browser language to determine which language to use when showing search results or adverts." (See www.google.com/privacy.html).

If you add the Google Toolbar to your Windows browser, then it can send Google information about the pages you view, and Google can update the Toolbar code automatically, without asking you. However, you can disable the Toolbar's "advanced features" by going to the Google menu and selecting privacy information. And it isn't "spyware" because Google isn't collecting information to sell, just to provide you with better searches. People could also get better results simply by improving their search techniques. Few bother, which is a pity, because fruitless searches waste a lot of time. If you make more than a dozen searches a day, then a small improvement in your techniques can deliver dramatic benefits. With that in mind, here are my top 10 search tips.

Imagine what you want

It may sound obvious, but you have to search Google for the words that will be on the page you want, not for a description of the page or website. For example, if you wanted to find a comparative review of various PDAs, then - using the convention that anything inside square brackets is what you would type into Google - you could search for [comparative review of pdas]. The alternative is to imagine the sort of review you want. It will probably include the words Palm, Pocket PC, iPaq and Clie, so instead, try searching for [review palm pocket pc ipaq clie].

Use quotation marks

If you search for, say, [John Adams], Google will find all the pages with John and all the pages with Adams, even if the words are unconnected. This finds 3.6m hits. However, if you put the words in quotation marks, this tells Google to treat them as one unit. Using ["John Adams"] eliminates 3m hits. It is especially important to use quotes if you are looking for something that includes a "stop word". These are the words Google ignores, because they are too common. They include: a, about, are, at, by, from, I, in, of, how, la, that, the, this, to, will, who, what, where, and when. If you search for the band [the smiths] then Google will ignore "the," the stop word, so it is better to search for ["the smiths"]. However, if your search only contains stop words, Google will search for them, though ["the who"] still works better than [the who].

Use the + sign

Another way to make sure Google includes a particular word in its search is to put a plus sign in front of it.

Use the - sign

The plus sign adds a word to a search so using a minus sign takes one away. This is very useful as a way of eliminating lots of hits you don't want. I frequently search for technical information on stupidly difficult things such as transferring files from a MiniDisc player to a PC, and often get deluged with results from shopping and price comparison sites such as Dealtime, Kelkoo and Bizrate. Many of these can be eliminated by adding -merchant to the search term.

Try a wild card

Some experienced searchers don't like Google because they think it doesn't allow them to exploit hard-won skills in creating Boolean searches using "wild cards" and AND and OR commands (see below). But Google understands more than it often lets on. For example, suppose you want to find a number of quiz sites that decide what kind of flower, bird, geek or tin-pot dictator you are. You will probably be surprised to hear that searching for ["what * am I"] will do that, with the asterisk acting as a "wild card" for any word. You can also use two or more asterisks together for longer phrases. Searching for ["from * to * pc"] can be useful, and wild cards are not counted in the 10-word search allowance.

Use the site: command

Look at a page of Google results and you should notice that some hits are indented. This is because many sites would produce thousands of hits for a term, but Google shows only two from each site. It indents the second result and adds a link that offers "More results from" that site. For example, search for ["nathan milstein"] then scroll down and click on the link for "more results link for classical.onino.co.uk". This restricts the hits to that site. Now if you look in the search box, you will see that it says site:classical.onino.co.uk. This is the site: command, and you can type it in directly to search any site you like. It helps, of course, if

the site has a short name, such as imdb.com [tampopo dvd site:imdb.com]. The neat thing is that you don't have to use a whole site name: you can search or exclude whole domains. For example, you can search for [tampopo dvd site:co.uk] or [tampopo dvd -site:com].

Use the operators

The site: operator is one of a long list that Google understands. These include filetype: (eg doc or pdf), intext: and allintext:, intitle: and allintitle:, inurl: and allinurl:, author: (in Google Groups) and location: (in Google News). What is the rest of the world saying about Beagle 2? Search for [beagle+2 -location:uk] to find out.

Google also understands a logical OR, as long as it is in caps. This means you can search for a hotel in Leeds OR Bradford, for example. It is very useful when people, places or things have alternative or variable spellings: [outsourcing bombay OR mumbai]. The OR command can be shortened to a vertical bar (|), as in [outsourcing bombay | mumbai]. Another way of adding alternatives is to use a twiddle or tilde character (~). Thus if you search for [~food], Google also searches for cooking, cuisine, nutrition, recipes and restaurants.

The Advanced Search page

Fortunately, you don't have to learn all these special operators to use them. All you have to do is click on Google's Advanced Search link. This brings up a form with drop-down menu choices that lets anyone make complex searches without even thinking about it. This page includes options to search a particular period or pages in a specified language.

Other enhanced searches

Google is always adding new features, and as well as being a search engine, it also works as a dictionary (define:), a glossary, and a very powerful calculator. It can even work out [the answer to life, the universe and everything]. But Google has also opened up its programming interface (API) so that other people can create applications to search its database of web pages. So far, most of these experiments are not very useful, but you can search recently added pages at GooFresh and compare results for keywords at GoogleFight. For more examples, see www.voelspriet.nl/googletools.htm.

Try a different search engine

Google is wonderful, there's no doubt about that. However, it does not always find the pages you want, so it is just as well to keep some alternatives handy. The main ones include stalwarts Alta Vista and All The Web, plus Vivisimo Vivisimo.com and Teoma. There are also "metasearch" search engines such as Dogpile and Metacrawler, which will send your query to several search engines at once. Google knows you have a choice, and it doesn't hurt to exercise it from time to time.

