



In Search of 10?



I can't boast that my wonderful marriage has reached its 10-year anniversary yet, nor have I lived in my current house for 10 years. I can't even say that I particularly remember my tenth birthday. Ten years might not seem like such a long time, but what were you doing 10 years ago?

It's not because I have a fetish with the number 10 that I bring all this up. Rather, it's to point out that the search engine, as we know it today, officially was born only 10 years ago. While the roots of search engines can be traced back to 1990, today's incarnation of searching the Web came about in 1993. Over the next few years, many online search engines officially will turn 10.

It is hard to imagine an Internet without search engines. Just how would one locate information without them? How would we attract business or research products? How would we use this Information age?

I've Been Searching ...

Not many of us think much about typing in a word or phrase on which to search. Nor do we necessarily pay attention to why things are listed as they are or even how it all works. The search box is there so we simply input what we want.

Which search engine a producer might use probably is based more on personal preference than anything. While there are well over 50 prominent search engine sites and several thousand lesser known ones, unbeknownst to most of us, there are relatively few true search engines. Most search sites on the Internet use one or, more likely, a combination of the following primary search services: Google, Open Directory, Inktomi (purchase by Yahoo 03/2003), Look Smart, and Teoma (Ask Jeeves). Additionally, there are several pay for placement services such as Overture, Fast, Northernlights, Findwhat, and Sprinks.

In addition to their own sponsored listings, popular sites such MSN, AOL, and Yahoo rely on these companies' services in whole or in part to bring the results for which people may be searching. Search results depend on which services the site uses. Trying a search on different sites can yield identical or completely different results. The producer should note that sites that use paid search services always will rank the paid results first.

To understand better how to make search engines work for us, some basic understanding of how they obtain and display their information is in order. There basically are two kinds of search engines. Some search engines rely on "spiders" or "robots" (software programs) to go out and index as many Web sites as possible. Web directories, on the other hand, use people to input and create their searchable databases. Yahoo!, Open Directory Project (ODP), and Ask Jeeves are some of the top directories sites.

... And Searching

How one searches for information is as important as where. For example, entering the term The Automated Agent will yield thousands of listings with topics dealing with many automated things as well as many topics relating to the word agent. This is not necessarily what the producer might have been looking for. Typing in the term "The Automated Agent" with quotes around it will return better, more relevant information, like this column for instance. Placing quotes around a search phrase forces most search engines to look only for that exact term, not each individual word.

Meta Crawling

A better way to search may be with what are called "Meta crawlers." These Web sites or programs send the user's searches to multiple engines and then compile the results. Some examples are www.profusion.com, www.dogpile.com, www.info.com, and www.surf wax.com

For several years I have used a software program called the Copernic Agent (www.Copernic.com). It offers an easy-to-use interface that queries many search engines at once. The basic version of this program is free, while the personal and professional versions offer more features and remove sponsored advertising. The

basic version would fulfill most producers' needs.

Safe Searching

The producer can eliminate objectionable content from his searches by using a search engine such as www.ah-ha.com. This service removes links to any site with explicit or objectionable content. I would call it a family friendly search engine.

And Then I Was Found

On the other side of searching is the producer's desire to be found. Producers who have invested in Web sites want people to be able to locate them. Being ranked highly in search engines is a desirable but often difficult to achieve goal. To help, there are Web sites and software packages designed to do just that.

Web Position Gold (www.web-positiongold.com) is a popular software package that assists in optimizing a Web site's ranking in the search engines. Compared to some pricing I found for Web site promotion, the \$149 price tag for up to five Web sites seems to be a bargain.

Two of the many search engine-ranking companies that specialize in getting Web pages to the top are www.Proboost.com and www.webranking.com. I won't expound on these services except to say that further research into these kinds of companies probably is advisable.

Money Talks

For producers and agencies who want better positioning, pay-per-click advertising may be an attractive alternative. In a pay-per-click program, the producer is charged a certain amount each time someone clicks on his or her link in the search results. The more the producer pays per click, the higher in the ranking the result is displayed.

In a pay-per-click program, the producer can set a monthly budget. When the budget has been spent, the producer's listing is dropped from the search results until next month, when the cycle repeats.

Some of the largest pay-per-click companies include www.Findwhat.com, www.Northernlights.com, and www.Sprinks.com.

Sponsored listings also may help to direct traffic to a Web site. Sites like www.Yahoo.com offer sponsored positions on their Web sites. Much like pay-per-click advertising, the sponsored programs will rank the producer's listing higher in the Web site's search results for a flat fee. Yahoo charges \$299 a year; the producer should keep in mind, however, that Yahoo is one of the Web's largest Internet traffic sites. More traffic may lead to more click-through traffic to the producer's Web site.

Two helpful Web sites a producer may want to visit to learn more on searching and being found on the Web are www.searchenginewatch.com and <http://www.searchengines.com>.

Comparatively speaking, the Internet is young and search engines are even younger. If the past 10 years are any indication of the future (I know, past performance is no guarantee of future results), knowing how to search as well as how to be found are two skills that will become invaluable to producers and agencies in the decades to come.