

## How People Search

[Web Smart Newsletter](#) originally published December 2004 - Updated July 2006. By Eric Holter.

### How People Search

For the past two months we've been writing about the power of words on the web. When it comes to website marketing the dictum "content is king" is true. The most popular sites always provide the best and most interesting content. Website marketing efforts are rewarded when frequent, quality content is added regularly. For the past year Newfangled has been busily building and testing new [NewfangledCMS tools](#) that help maximize content based marketing. Email newsletters, advanced tracking tools, search engine sensitive pages, and a Google optimizer make the most of your content. But all these tools are useless without one essential ingredient - content!

They're out there searching, and you're one of them. Think about it...how often do you use Google or Yahoo to find information you need? Do you use it to research products before buying? Do you compare prices? Do you check out a company's website before calling them...do you check out what others are saying about them before doing business? Do you research medical information or compare product features? I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but if you answered "no" to most of these questions, you're part of an ever shrinking minority!

### How do people find stuff through search engines?

How do people find what they are looking for using search engines? The answer to this question holds the key to optimizing your own website. And guess what...you probably already know the answer! The answer is that they find things the same way you do. If you are among the majority of people who use search engines frequently, you've learned a lot about searching; you just might not realize everything you've learned. Becoming aware of your own techniques can help you get your own website's pages listed and visited more frequently.

### Learn how you've learned how to search.

As an example of a typical search process, let's see what kind of search process we might use to find your service through a search engine. Let's assume you are a small to mid-size advertising agency or design firm. How might I begin my search? Let's try "advertising agency." Whoa...that's no good...18 million results. Most of the top ten results are associations and publications. I suspect "design firm" might not work any better. Well perhaps I can limit the results by including a region like New England (advertising agency + "New England"). Well, that helped a bit, but I still ended up with mostly magazines, associations, and advertising portal listing sites. A couple of big firms showed up, but I'm looking for a smaller shop. Maybe I should be more specific, let's try print design firm + brochures + "New England." Nope...still too many results. I seem to be finding a lot of printers, because they all describe themselves as having capabilities like "print" and "brochures." That actually makes sense, since companies are going to use words and phrases in their websites that describe what their business does from their perspective...not necessarily my perspective in searching. How would a graphic design firm describe itself? Maybe "graphic designer?" Hmm, this seems to be working better; I'm actually getting some design shops in my search results. But there are so many graphic design shops out there, how do I find the right one for my project? Since I want to get some medical brochures designed, perhaps I should include the word "medical" to find a designer with specific experience in that area. Ah, now we're cookin' with heat! Many of my results now list the portfolio pages of various design firms that contain examples of medical projects they've worked on. As long as I've found their portfolio page, I can certainly get to their home page from there.

If you've been using search engines for a while, you've probably learned quite a few things simply by trial and error. Most people don't learn their search engine techniques through training or books, but rather through their experience. Searching is a skill that we are all in the process of learning. Because of the vast, ever-increasing amount of information on the web, we are constantly in need of refining our search engine skills. Among the things you've already learned about searching is the lesson that a one word search is usually a waste of time. One word searches are too broad; the results aren't helpful. You've learned that it's better to use two or more words in order to refine

your results. You may have learned some advanced tricks like using the "+" or "-" commands to include only pages that definitely contain a particular word or definitely do not contain a certain word. You've probably learned how to make educated guesses about which words or phrases work best to find what you're after. You also know that it often takes multiple attempts to find what you need. The more you use search engines, the better you get at guessing, and the faster you find your objective.

Not only have you learned how to use search phrases, but you've also learned how to visually scan through search result screens. You know that the links on the right of the screen are usually paid ad listings, so you scrutinize them differently than actual search results. You probably pass by listings that have long titles with lots of extra words not in your search phrase. You tend to click on listings that are short and contain the exact words you used in your search. You are less likely to choose a link when the title contains only some of your search words. You also tend to skip titles that contain your terms, but do not list them in the same order you entered. You are very likely to click links that contain your exact words or phrases.

## Improving Search Engine Results

Let's quantify what we've observed about how we search so we can begin to apply these lessons to improve our own site's search engine performance. Our mini-case study demonstrates that searches are usually determined through a process of trying and refining until we narrow the results down to what we're looking for. Here are a few principles we can distill from this experiment...

We search with phrases, not with single words.

Often, an indirect approach gets better results...we guess at how our target website would "think about itself."

By adding specific qualifiers to broad categories, we can refine our results.

Our refined search terms tend to lead us to website's subpages rather than its home page.

The closer a link's title matches the phrase I've used, the more likely I am to click it.

Now that we know how we search, how can I use this knowledge to increase the likelihood that my site will show up in results and lead visitors to my site?

I shouldn't use one word descriptions to describe my pages; phrases are much better.

I should use phrases that are similar to ones that would be used in an actual search process...which is not always the same kind of phrase that describes my page from my own perspective.

Since subpages are more "specific" in their content than a home page can be, I should pay even more attention to my title phrases on subpages than on my home page.

I should create lots and lots of subpages with search-oriented title phrases since each page represents another opportunity for people to find my content by doing narrow searches.

## Benefits of Search Engine Optimization

Let's flesh this out a little with a concrete example. A couple months ago I wrote a newsletter for my site and called it "Words Make the Web Work." Nice title, if I do say so myself. Unfortunately, if someone is interested in the importance of website content, they aren't going to type "how words make the web work" into Google. Rather, they would type in something like "importance of website content."

Unfortunately, that clever title of mine is not helping me at all, because it does not contain any of those words. Good thing I took my newsletter and broke it up into smaller content pieces and titled one of these new search engine sensitive pages "Importance of Website Content." Now, when someone searches Google using the phrase "Importance of Website Content" they will see my page listed in Google. Since I create many of these pages every month, my search engine traffic is steadily growing. Every so often I get lucky and stumble upon a phrase that performs extremely well, like my "ajax website examples" page, which generates lots of visits.

There you have it... Newfangled's website marketing strategy. Go with the flow. People have to use highly targeted phrases and search terms to find anything useful, so give them something useful to find! And give them a lot of it!

It comes down to content. If your website has five pages, there are only five occasions for refined searches to come across your content. If you have five hundred, you'll have a lot of traffic. You're not likely to have five hundred pages right away. But if you add one article per month and break that article up into several "search engine sensitive" pages, you'll soon be on your way to building an archive of helpful content that will increase your traffic... and your business.