Improve your search@bility

By Aubrey Warren

The internet has made searching for information easier than it's ever been and with the click of a mouse we can access more than eight billion pages of information on the web. Which is where our problems begins, writes Aubrey Warren.

Our challenge now is not lack of information but too much information. Or, to be more specific, trying to quickly extract accurate, relevant information from the ever-increasing mass that is out there.

For example, type in “business skills” into Google and you'll get about 68 million results. Given that managing our time and knowing how to gather relevant information are critical business skills, being able to access all those web pages hasn't helped us much.

The good news is that there are some simple and basic search tools that can help us refine our searches to get more relevant information. We'll look at five search strategies that can help you focus your searches and provide more relevant results more quickly.

For simplicity, we'll focus here mainly on Google, which is the most popular search engine, ahead of Yahoo and MSN, according to searchengine.com.

First, it's helpful to understand what search engines – for example, Google, Yahoo!, msn, Excite – do. They are constantly searching the information “out there” on the web (using things called spiders or bots) to build databases of information, indexed by keywords.

So, for example, when we type in “business skills” the search engine already knows where those keywords can be found, so grabs those files for us and attempts to list them in terms of relevance. Naturally, the more information we can provide about what is actually relevant to us, the better quality results we will receive.

Which leads us to our first search strategy:

1. “Tell me what you’re really thinking”

Most of us simply click on our search engine and type in a couple of words related to our search objective – for example, “business skills”. But what sorts of business skills do we want to find out about – recruiting, management, finance, networking? Just adding another word to our search can refine it considerably, providing us with much less irrelevant returns.

You can further focus your search by using the “similar pages” link that appears to the right of each returned page. If, on reviewing the initial returns you find one that seems more relevant to your needs than the others, by selecting “similar pages” the search engine will get rid of those that aren’t like the one you’ve selected. This can narrow a field of tens of thousands down to a few dozen.

2. Pluses, minuses and quotation marks

Here's a simple but overlooked tip to focus your results. If you were to type in “business skills” and add the word “networking” you’d get about 25 million results back from Google, because it will return pages with any of those three words. By putting a plus symbol (+) in front of each word (+business +skills +networking) you will be ensuring that you only get results that have all three words on the page.
Remembering that if you find a result that seems pretty good you can always click on “similar pages”, you can also limit the search to pages where the words “business” and “skills” appear together as a phrase (by inserting quotation marks around the phrase) and where “networking” also appears on the same page (“business skills” +networking).

But one of the things you may notice is that “networking” is a term often used in computing. If you’re not interested in that type of networking, screen out those results by adding the word “computer” with a minus sign in front of it (so your search command now looks like this: “business skills” +networking –computer). Now you have a much more focused list and your “similar pages” search will enable you to even more quickly locate exactly what you want.

3. Look for the title

There’s even more you can do to focus your results. If you’re chasing a document that you know the title of or you want your search to return results that have your search words in the title (“business networking skills”), just preface your search with the command “intitle” (or “title” in Yahoo). Limiting your search to keywords within a document title can considerably reduce the number of less relevant results, for example, your search command “intitle: business networking skills” will limit your results to 400 – not a bad refinement from 68 million!

4. Advanced search

Google and Yahoo both offer an “advanced search” option on their home page (MSN provides a “search builder” at the top of the first results page). These allow you to limit the search in a number of ways, including domain types (e.g., .com or .edu), the last time the source was updated (e.g., last three months, anytime, last 12 months), and file format (e.g., pdf, PowerPoint, text). Restrictions like these help the search engine to focus more tightly on exactly what you want.

“It’s on the internet” is no guarantee whatsoever that something is accurate or useful, so evaluating content is our responsibility as users, but by being aware of some identifying signs we can help ourselves at least discern where information is coming from. Domain names provide some clues. The Internet is divided into six major domains: .com, .co indicate a commercial organization; .edu, .ac indicates education; .gov indicates government; .net indicates a network; .org identifies non-profit organizations; .mil identifies military organizations.

In addition to knowing the source of information, it’s also important to know how up-to-date it is. Advanced search enables you to limit returns to specified timeframes.

5. Print and scholarly searches

Further down your advanced search page, Google provides a couple of interesting options that may be useful for particular searches.

Google Scholar provides a link to academic journals, enabling you to search specifically for things like peer-reviewed papers, theses, books, abstracts and technical reports from all broad areas of research. You can use Google Scholar to find articles from academic publishers, professional societies, preprint repositories and universities.

Any one of these five strategies should be able to help you focus your web search more effectively, providing better results and saving you time.