

The Web: Niche search tools proliferating

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You're exceptionally bored at work and want to search the Internet for tonight's TV listings to see when the reruns of "Law & Order" are on the Bravo cable network. Typing the name of the crime drama show into a conventional search engine, like a Google.com or a Yahoo.com, and seeking the TV listings, may not be a good use of your time, these days, experts tell United Press International's The Web column.

In fact, it may yield millions of possible links, most of which have nothing to do with the listing for the air-time of the show. You might need to use one of the more specialized search engines that have emerged. "From online video to Web-based shopping, real estate, gasoline, etcetera, there are specialized search sites and engines for a myriad of products, services and content," a San Francisco-based spokesman for Dealio.com, an online shopping comparison sight, told the Web. "Vertical search is evolving to meet consumers' needs."

In years past, there were, to be sure, specialized search engines. But they were, for the most part, for industrial or commercial applications -- sites that scientists could use to buy flasks and other specialty items or engineers could use to buy nuts and bolts. But now, there are search engines for consumers, not trade specialists, on an array of broad, but general topics, including the following:

- Blinkx.com, a search site for TV and other video clips;
- Dealio.com, a search site for pricing on 30 million consumer products;

- Gasbuddy.com, which helps you find low cost gas in your city or suburb;
- LinkedIn.com, a professional networking search and content management site for job seekers;
- SideStep.com, a search service for travel services;
- StubHub.com, an engine that helps you buy tickets to concerts and sporting events;
- Zillow.com, a search site for real estate listings;
- TrustWatch.com, a search site for consumers to identify spam and other fraudulent e-mails online.

Each site hones its links to make searching as easy as, well, the early days of the Internet. "With the explosion of video content online, users need new ways to find all of the rich media content available on the Web," said a San Francisco-based spokeswoman for Blinkx.com founder Suranga Chandratillake. "They currently have over four million hours of audio and video content from the Web."

Consumers can use the site to find clips online from MTV, the History Channel and other producers.

Since it is getting harder for some to be noticed on the general Internet, marketers have taken up the tactic of "optimizing" their content so it does indeed get picked up by the Googles and Yahoos of the world, as well as the specialty sites. Companies are writing marketing materials with "key words" in mind to be picked up by search engines online, said Sharon Dotson, founder of Bayou City, a firm in the marketing business based in Houston, told The Web. This kind of key word search crafting

consistently lands clients on the front page of searches on Google.com.

Specialist search engines, meantime, are getting more savvy, collaborating with the major players in the industry, and essentially offering their services as sub-sites on the leading search engines. Google.com has a new "co-op program" to work with these kinds of companies, said Erica Sniad, an in-house spokeswoman for Epocrates.com. These kinds of deals help users get "more relevant results, based on content providers in their Google directory," she said. For example, Epocrates, a provider of clinical reference information, has developed a "front porch" for the Web which enables doctors to search for content in their specific databases via Google.com. Examples of searches could be as specific as "Paxil dosing," or other, drug-related questions, Sniad told The Web.

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