

Google Marches Toward Universal Search

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Universal search has arrived. No, we haven't made contact with a bunch of intergalactic civilizations and been handed keys to a universal-scale Library of Alexandria. No, this news is much bigger than that: it's from Google.

Beginning today, the search leviathan starts down a path toward integrating search information from previously disparate sources. What that means is that a universal search begun from your Google search bar today will include books, images, maps, news, videos, and Web sites, and provide you with a single set of results. A lot of the improvement and innovation might sneak up on users because much of what powers it has occurred under the hood in the form of changes to the basic ranking algorithms Google employs.

The news came out as part of an event at Google's Mountain View, Calif. campus where the point was pounded home at the day's opening presentation: search remains the heart and soul of the business. The event, called Searchology, was an invitation-only get-together for journalists, and to buttress their point, representatives cited a number many of us have seen before: 70 percent of Google's engineers are hard at work improving and studying search full time (except for that spare time spent making widgets, of course).

Our very own Editor-in-Chief, Jim Louderback, is in attendance. A particularly apt - if long - fruit analogy came from Udi Manber, Google's VP of Engineering, during today's conference :

"...search for fruit; how do you compare apples to oranges? That's what we do, if you think about it. We get lots of results, and then figure out what's the right order. Per capita consumption of oranges: 80 pounds. Per capita for apples: 50 pounds (in the US). Oranges are more important. But if you look at fresh produce, 12 pounds of oranges versus 20 pounds of apples. So do apples go first? What about the most valuable fruit crop: grapes? They come in more expensive packages. Which fruit goes first in a search for "fruit"? We're not just comparing Web pages, but different media types. Text of an apple, or an image of an apple? Book? Video? How do I decide? Large scale, multidimensional, not-well-defined problem. That's what we do."

In terms of things truly new to Google users, the most interesting announcement today is availability of yet another new version of Google Experimental from within Google Labs . Users can try out some of the latest search experiments Google has undertaken, things not deemed ready for primetime on the main Google pages. One of the first experiments to be featured on the site enables users to view their search results on a map or timeline.

In addition to universal search Google users will find an updated homepage design and several new navigation features. These include new dynamically generated navigation links that appear above search results and suggest additional avenues of search deemed relevant to a searcher's query. Aids to navigation include a shift to a new main page design already well-known to Gmail users. Instead of links to other Google properties appearing at the top, they now will reside on the top left side and include links to Gmail, Google Calendar, Google Docs & Spreadsheets, and Picasa Web Albums.

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