

Bing it on: Microsoft overhauls search, again

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(AP) -- Microsoft Corp. is rolling out a redesigned search site in the coming days and hopes it will lure more Web surfers than the two most recent incarnations, Live Search and MSN Search.

The new site, Bing, adds touches intended to make everyday Web searching a little less haphazard. Bing also tries to make it easier for people to buy things, book travel and find credible health information.

History has not been kind to even the best search innovators. Many companies, including Amazon.com Inc. and IAC/InterActiveCorp., and startups like Hakia, ChaCha and Cuil have tried to improve on the basic "10 blue links" format of [search results](#), but [Google](#) Inc. has so far been unstoppable.

Microsoft's last effort, Live Search, failed to catch on partly because the software maker didn't do much to promote it. Marketing is no guarantee of success - IAC heavily advertised makeovers of Ask.com - but this time, Microsoft appears to be taking no chances. Ad Age reported Microsoft plans to spend as much as \$100 million on advertising Bing.

Redmond, Wash.-based Microsoft has been stuck in third place behind Google and Yahoo Inc. for years. Its share of U.S. search queries was 8.2 percent in April, according to the research group comScore Inc. Google was used for 64.2 percent of queries, and Yahoo's share totaled 20.4 percent.

The numbers are important. Google's sales - \$4.7 billion in the first quarter - are tied to its search dominance, because companies will pay more to reach a wider audience. Microsoft, by contrast, posted a quarterly loss in its online advertising business.

"We want to do better," Microsoft CEO [Steve Ballmer](#) said Thursday at The Wall Street Journal's D: All Things Digital conference in Carlsbad, Calif.

"There are times in our history where we've felt a little bit like Rocky," he continued, referring to the fictional underdog boxer. "It takes persistence in this stuff. You don't always get things right."

When asked why Microsoft chose "Bing," he said, "The name is short, it's easy to say, it works globally."

To mount a credible challenge to Google, Microsoft tried taking over Yahoo last year. But after Yahoo rebuffed its \$47.5 billion offer, Microsoft turned its attention to improving its own Live Search.

Ballmer reiterated Thursday that Microsoft is still interested in a search partnership with Yahoo, and not an outright acquisition, but he didn't disclose any new details.

Yahoo has been tweaking its search results to include different types of information depending on the query. For instance, it would show photos in response to searches for landmarks or dossier-style listings for people.

Some of Bing's features showed up on a Microsoft blog in March, when the new site was known as "Kumo." The most obvious difference is a bar of links running down the left-hand side of Bing search results pages. Some searches - especially ones for celebrities or travel destinations - yield links to help narrow results into categories. For pro athletes, it might offer links for statistics and highlights. For Thailand, categories include weather and real estate.

Bing also lists related search terms on the left, not at the bottom of the page like Google does. It keeps track of recent searches and gives people a way to e-mail links from that search history or post them on Facebook.

For some types of queries, Microsoft is positioning Bing as a destination rather than a quick gateway to other sites. For airfare searches, Bing produces results from Farecast, a travel-comparison startup Microsoft acquired last year. Microsoft is still working out some bugs, so for now users have to know a few tricks for it to work consistently. A search using airport codes, such as "SEA to SAN," brings up ticket prices and links to see more, but "Seattle to San Diego" turns up news stories about the cities.

Shopping with Bing can yield an Amazon.com-like experience, with ways to narrow results by price, brand and the availability of free shipping, without leaving the search page.

Bing also tries to guide searchers to trustworthy information about medical conditions. Type in "chicken pox" or "tendinitis," and the first result is a Mayo Clinic article. (Google's top result for chicken pox comes from kidshealth.org; for tendinitis, it shows a Wikipedia link.)

Microsoft isn't banking on beating Google, said Mike Nichols, a general manager in the search group. But Microsoft does want to transform its also-ran search image.

"We want to capture a unique position in consumers' minds. They need to know why is it that they should use this product," Nichols said in an interview.

Matt Rosoff, an analyst for the independent research group Directions on Microsoft, said he thinks Microsoft's search results are usually on par with Google's, and he appreciates the new features.

Combined with the extensive ad campaign, [Microsoft](#) has a chance to increase its share, he said, but "I have to wonder whether users are really crying out for a new search engine."

More information: People can find out more about Bing and give it a [test run online](#).

AP Business Writer Elliot Spagat contributed to this report from Carlsbad, Calif.

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