

# Review: Need advice? Aardvark can sniff it out

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In this screen shot provided by Aardvark, the Aardvark service is demonstrated. Aardvark lets you ask questions that are routed to friends and friends-of-friends. The goal is to deliver specific, speedy answers on everything from apartment hunting to zoo recommendations. (AP Photo/Aardvark)

(AP) -- I like to get advice from friends on all sorts of things, and love to give it even more. In the past few years, instant messaging, e-mail and Twitter have sped up the process, but there's still room for improvement.

The creators of a free Web service called Aardvark think they have the solution. Aardvark lets you ask questions that get routed to friends and friends of friends. The goal is to quickly deliver specific answers on everything from apartments to zoos.

Aardvark is far from the first relayer of online advice. For example,

[Yahoo](#) Answers and LinkedIn let users give each other guidance. The recently launched Hunch.com uses software to offer people answers on a number of preselected topics.

But Aardvark is counting on setting itself apart with a combination of software (which analyzes and classifies queries) and trusted hardware (people who sign up to ask and respond to questions within a relatively confined social circle). While the service has a ways to go, it's fun, clever and helpful.

You can sign up through Aardvark's main site, [vark.com](#) ([aardvark.im](#) also works), though you currently must have a Facebook account, because that's how Aardvark knows who your friends are. Once that's done, there are many ways to use Aardvark: On its main site, via instant messaging services like Google Talk and AIM, over e-mail or through Twitter.

I primarily tested Aardvark through [Google](#) Talk, which runs on my computer and smart phone. When I was off-line, Aardvark shot me answers by e-mail. You can also set your account so it will e-mail you questions when you're not online.

Initially, I was skeptical about the quality of answers I would receive, partly because I didn't have many friends using the service. But the network effect is powerful: By including friends, friends of friends, [classmates](#), co-workers and people living in my area, Aardvark presented me with several hundred potential respondents.

For my first question, I tried something simple: How long does it take to drive from New York City to San Francisco? Aardvark immediately spit back a message informing me that short questions don't often get answers. It also suggested that I rephrase by adding another sentence.

I rolled my eyes, and after a few minutes I did get some answers. A user named Steve B. said it would take four days if I drove nonstop, while Nancy F. said two drivers could do it in 2.5 days driving essentially nonstop or I could spread it out over four or five days of "serious driving."

Bolstered by this success, I starting asking more - and more detailed - questions. I solicited advice on a drum set for a beginner "who wants a nice sound but doesn't want to pay that much," and got two totally different answers.

Within four minutes, Gregory K. responded that Ludwig, Tama and Pacific "are the brands most often cited as being good, solid beginner sets." I followed up by asking him about prices and whether I should buy new or used equipment, and he gave me more details.

Right now, most queries get answered in under five minutes, and Aardvark co-founder Damon Horowitz said many are answered in a minute or two.

Even if you get a response early on you may still get one a while later. Indeed, I got a second answer to my drums question after about three hours: Wouter V. suggested I buy a smaller kit and good cymbals that I could eventually sell if I want to upgrade. "Keep it simple, but buy to last," he said.

One odd thing: Even though I was interacting with people supposedly connected to me, I never got a response from one of my friends. Maybe this was because several of them hadn't denoted that many topics for which they felt comfortable answering questions, so Aardvark wasn't that likely to ping them for advice.

As my [friends](#) know, I really dig dishing out opinions, whether it's on a

new boyfriend or an old film, so it wasn't surprising that I had more fun answering questions than asking them through Aardvark.

Maybe it's a function of the instant-information age, but I quickly learned that Aardvark users expect good answers fast. And if they don't like your first suggestion, they're not shy about prodding you for more.

The first question I answered concerned bars on New York's Upper West Side with a big selection of beers on tap and international brands. I proposed a joint called The Dead Poet, but the asker, Aitan E., had been there and dismissed its selection of brews. I tried again by pointing to Dive Bar on Amsterdam and West 95th Street, and Aitan thanked me and said he'd check it out.

One cool thing: Aardvark keeps track of all your questions and answers, so there's no need to write anything down or save instant messages or e-mails. You can resubmit a question to solicit more advice.

This is especially useful when you get several answers, as I did when asking where I could get reasonably priced, neat-looking printed fabric in San Francisco or on the Web. I got four very different responses, but my favorite came from Megan M., who said I should try big-name stores like Wal-Mart, and then followed up by suggesting I scour thrift stores for funky vintage sheets - a great idea that hadn't occurred to me.

Like that give-and-take, many Aardvark conversations have a commercial element - over half of them, according to Horowitz, as people ask about restaurants, travel and more. Eventually, Aardvark plans to add advertising links to answers, so if a customer clicks a link and buys a product, the company will make money.

For now, though, Aardvark is concentrating on the user experience. It's doing a pretty good job so far.

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Got a technology question? Send an e-mail to [gadgetgurus\(at\)ap.org](mailto:gadgetgurus(at)ap.org).

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