Promising new trends in Web search engines

July 15 2009, By Troy Wolverton

The Internet is a vastly different place than it was 15 years ago, but the way consumers search it has changed very little.

Yes, the underlying software and hardware are faster and more powerful, and the algorithms used to spit out results are more precise. But typical Internet users still search the Web as they did in its infancy: They type a series of key words into a search box and get back a text list of Web page titles and links that they then have to comb through to find what they are looking for.

That process may soon get a radical overhaul.

Numerous companies -- including the major search providers -- are working to improve the search experience. For someone such as me who spends much of his life on the Internet, that's a tantalizing prospect.

Like many consumers, I primarily use Google to search the Web and am generally satisfied with the results. But often I must comb through several links -- or even several pages worth -- to find what I want.

Searching with any mainstream search engine can be like trying to speak a foreign language. You often must put a lot of thought into using just the right keywords to get the information you're looking for. And Google or Yahoo typically won't answer your question directly, but instead try to point you to a Web page that can. Making that process simpler and more direct would be great.

Perhaps the most high-profile recent effort to improve search has come from Microsoft with its new Bing search engine. In some ways, Bing looks and works just like Google. But Microsoft has added a few interesting tweaks.

In a column to the left of your results, you get a list of related searches and links to recent searches you've done. And if you position your mouse over one of the text results, Bing will display the first several paragraphs of information from the linked page.

That could be a real time saver. To get the same information on other search engines, you typically have to click on the link, go to the Web page -- and then click back to the search results if the page wasn't what you were looking for.

Bing also claims to be able to give direct answers to particular questions, most notably in areas such as shopping and travel. If you were looking for prices on flights from San Jose to New York, for example, you could simply type "San Jose to New York" and immediately get a quote for a ticket and a link to buy it.

This feature and others are hit or miss now. It didn't work if I tried "San Jose to San Antonio," for example. But it shows promise.

Another new site that's gotten a lot of buzz is Wolfram Alpha. Instead of being a general Web search engine, it aggregates information from databases and attempts to answer questions directly.

Say you wanted to get the population of San Jose. A Google search points you to the Wikipedia page for the city and to SanJoseCA.gov, the city's homepage. In contrast, Wolfram Alpha spits back a number (912,334 as of 2004) and displays a graph illustrating the city's growth over time.

Similarly, if you're trying to find out what your monthly payment will be on a $500,000 loan with a 7.9 percent annual interest rate, a Google search would lead you to a loan calculator. But Wolfram Alpha will make the calculation for you, estimating not only what you'll pay each month but also the total interest you'll pay over the life of the loan, and how much principal you'll pay each year.

The idea is to cut out intermediary steps. You get your answer immediately, rather than having to find the right page that might have the answer.

Even with sites such as Wolfram Alpha, you still may have to go the traditional search route -- and scan through multiple search results -- to answer many questions. Sites such as SpaceTime.com and Searchme.com are trying to make that process easier by allowing you to view the search results as snapshots of the actual Web pages they link to.

Both sites work similarly to the Cover Flow technology in Apple's iTunes software. The Web page snapshots are displayed one at a time, and users can flip through them by pressing their left or right cursor buttons. The sites typically display the snapshots much faster than if you clicked on each Web link to load the page.

Perhaps the most interesting development in search is the effort under way by multiple players to provide access to so-called "real-time" information, often by giving an up-to-the-minute glimpse of what people are discussing on Twitter.

Twitter has been proving its chops lately as a real information tool. Many people first heard about Michael Jackson's death on the micro-blogging site and some of the first reports about the plane crashing into the Hudson River came from the site.

Making such Twitter reports easier to access could be a real boon for news hounds, stock pickers, marketers, emergency personnel and more.

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