

Google rolls out feature to track down easy answers

May 13 2010, By Jessica Guynn

Google Inc. says it's always looking for ways to make Internet searches smarter. The latest iteration after nearly a decade of search market dominance: a new feature that fields more robust answers to common questions.

Listening to "Abbey Road" and wondering when John Lennon died? Type the query and get the answer: Dec. 8, 1980. Visiting New York City and wondering how tall the Empire State Building is? 1,250 feet.

Think of it as the perfect companion for Trivial Pursuit.

Why does [Google](#) keep tweaking its famed algorithm? Because a slew of competitors large and small are still trying to unseat the company that has defined its mission as organizing the world's information.

Facebook, for example, is pushing the idea that people would rather get information from their friends. Twitter has unveiled the concept of real-time search that taps into the latest chatter. Together, they and others are challenging the formidable intelligence of Google's algorithm, which it contends delivers the most accurate results.

Part of Google's effort to keep doing that is Google Squared, which launched a year ago. Google Squared was a first attempt to find and extract structured data from across the Web. A team of Google engineers in New York has worked to improve the technology and add new features, such as the ability to sort data and export it.

Now, using that technology, Google has improved the accuracy of answers and has given users easy access to the sources of those answers, said Noah Weiss, product manager for Google Squared. Users were able to access that feature from their desktops beginning Wednesday and will be able to do so via their smart phones within the next week.

Google will be able to deliver millions of these fact-seeking searches because the feature relies on an algorithmic understanding of Web pages, Weiss said.

"It's all basically coming out of research to understand the Web better," Weiss said.

Here's how it works. Say you want to know when actress Catherine Zeta-Jones was born. You enter that query into the search box. You will get the following result: 25 September 1969. If you click the "show sources" button, you will see all of the websites that provided that information, including the relevant excerpt.

With Google Squared, the company is trying to fulfill one of the early promises of the Web: Ask a simple question, get a quick answer.

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