Kayak simplifies airfare shopping

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One of the primary applications of the internet is its ability to find just about anything. But unless you know exactly where to look, chances are you use some kind of search engine to do the locating for you. Google, for example, is one of the most popular search engines out there. It's uncanny how the thing for which you are looking is usually somewhere within the first page of hits. In fact, more often than not it's usually within the first five on that first page.

But sometimes the thing you want to find may not just be at one location.

Take travel, for example. More specifically, let's look at airfares. With so many airlines out there, going to one airline website at a time would take way too much of your valuable time. There are of course, specialty travel websites such as Travelocity, Priceline and Expedia. But those sites, as well as travel agency sites, mostly offer the particular deals they have made, and then only with the participating airlines with which they've contracted.

Kayak.com is very different. It's what is known as a meta-search engine. And unlike the aforementioned websites, Kayak itself sells nothing. A meta-search engine is a website that sends your query to multiple search engine databases simultaneously.

Some of the better ones let you actually refine your search query on the fly while you watch your refinements appear on the meta-search engine's result page. Kayak is one of those.

When you log onto Kayak.com, you are presented with a simple search form that asks where you wish to travel. You can search for one-way or round-trip trips, as well as multi-city itineraries. There's also a handy "Prefer Nonstop" checkbox. That's pretty much it. Clicking the "Search multiple sites" button starts the action.

On a well-designed result page, a graphic shows airline websites being scanned for their up-to-the-moment information. Kayak has the ability to go to nearly all of the airline databases, extract their information and reformat it into something it can display for you. The animated display also shows you an interim status of specific airlines that are being scanned at that moment. All of this takes only a few moments.

When Kayak is done, you are presented with an ordered list of flights that meet your search criteria. The default is to sort them by price, from the most economical to the very expensive. You'll be amazed at the diversity of fares that go to the same places. You can also sort by other criteria, such as airline or number of stops.

On the left side of the result page are sliders which you can drag to either widen or narrow your depart and arrival times. As you move them, the listing of flights that match instantly updates to match. Further refinements let you alter the number of stops and the specific airlines you want to include or exclude. You can also expand the number of nearby airports your search will cover simply by clicking in the corresponding checkboxes next to airport names. Another slider lets you alter the price range you are willing to accept.

Once you find the flights in which you are interested, Kayak provides links that provide further details about the flights as well as a direct link to the airline or service that has those tickets available for purchase.

Remember that Kayak itself sells nothing. It's a free service. And that's

one of its strongest points, even more so than its really great meta-search ability. Kayak is advertising-driven, making its money from unobtrusive ad links on the right side of the results page which are on par with what you see on [Google](#). They really don't interfere with anything.

Meta-search engines are wonderful in that they can really even out the playing field and often give you a more honest or realistic result because they show you a wide cross-section of the competition.

While Kayak is primarily an airfare meta-search engine, you can also use it to check on hotels, car rentals and other associated deals. But Kayak's main strength is aggregating airfares, and it does so in an unbiased manner that I really like.

More information: www.kayak.com

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