

geek speak:

A Guide to Using Search Engines

By David Alexander

Welcome to *Geek Speak*, a new column designed to keep cultural institutions in the know on the latest technologies. The tech world moves at a dizzying pace and we hope to make it a little clearer for those in the museum world. We will review hardware and software, make the business and technology of web pages a little clearer and hopefully make the internet a more interesting place for you to roam. If you have suggestions for future topics, please email them to zeroone@zeroonedesign.com

We'll start with an easy topic. Search engines, how did we ever live without them? It is midnight, provincial funding has been cut yet again and you realize that the cultural world is not going to make you a millionaire. You wake up wondering how you could get that perfect chinchilla ranching position in Terrace without leaving the house. Turn on the computer, pick your favorite search engine and go. Welcome to the future.

A search engine is like your dog, Spot. Throw a stick and he comes back with it. With a search engine, you enter a word or a phrase and the engine goes off to hunt the net, coming back with any sites containing the word or phrase you asked for. The search engine lists or "ranks" the resulting sites in order of relevance.

There are two kinds of search engines on the internet. True search engines such as Alta Vista (altavista.ca) draw upon databases created by spidering through the web and indexing everything along the way. These search engines are more suited to a detailed search. Directories such as Yahoo! (yahoo.ca) rely on hierarchical subject menus. Homepages are registered with Yahoo! and slotted into these subject areas. Directories are excellent for general searches.

There are literally thousands of search engines to choose from, but the most popular search engine today is Google

(google.ca). It is the number one used search engine and now, as well as searching "normal" web pages (html files), Google will search PDF, DOC, PS, and many other file types that it finds on the web. It is a hybrid, using a search engine model that spiders the web and indexes new sites but also slots these sites into hierarchical subject menus.

Not only does Google supply text based results but it also has a number of other useful functions. You can "google" images on the internet using the Google Image Search; you can post and read comments in Usenet discussion forums – an excellent means of finding answers to technical questions – and you can even search Search on Google by voice with a telephone call.

With the popularity of Google has come a new form of entertainment on the web – Google hacks. Google hacks are legal tips, tricks, and techniques you can use to make your Google searching experience more robust. In some cases a little odd as well. Buzztoolbox.com has a great list of Google hacks that allow you to do everything from searching yellow pages for phone numbers to creating Google poetry. A good tip – if you can't find your museum webpage listed on Google, you can suggest they add it to their directory at google.com/addurl.html.

With any search you may find yourself wading through a lot of garbage to find the site you want, but don't give up hope – chances are whatever it is you are looking for is out there on the Net.

David Alexander (david@zeroonedesign.com) is a geek, an active member of the Canadian Public Relations Society and a founding partner in Zero One Design Inc., a multimedia company specializing in the cultural sector. This column is dedicated to our mentor Joe Nagel - wherever you are Joe, we trust your palm pilot will be better than everyone else's.