

# Major Search Engines and Directories

By Danny Sullivan , March 28, 2007  
<http://searchenginewatch.com>

In the search engine list below, Search Engine Watch provides a guide to the major search engines of the web. Why are these considered to be "major" search engines? Because they are either well-known or well-used.

For webmasters, the major search engines are the most important places to be listed, because they can potentially generate so much traffic.

For searchers, well-known, commercially-backed search engines generally mean more dependable results. These search engines are more likely to be well-maintained and upgraded when necessary, to keep pace with the growing web.

On this page, you will see reference to "crawlers" and "crawler-based results" versus "directories" and "human-powered results." These describe the two major ways that search engines get editorial listings. See the [How Search Engines Work](#) page to understand more about the difference between crawlers and directories.

## ***Top Choices***

The search engines below are all excellent choices to start with when searching for information.

### **Google <http://www.google.com>**

Voted four times Most Outstanding Search Engine by Search Engine Watch readers, Google has a well-deserved reputation as the top choice for those searching the web. The crawler-based service provides both comprehensive coverage of the web along with great relevancy. It's highly recommended as a first stop in your hunt for whatever you are looking for.

Google provides the option to find more than web pages, however. Using on the top of the search box on the Google home page, you can easily seek out images from across the web, discussions that are taking place on Usenet newsgroups, locate news information or perform product searching. Using the More link provides access to human-compiled information from the Open Directory (see below), catalog searching and other services.

Google is also known for the wide range of features it offers, such as cached links that let you "resurrect" dead pages or see older versions of recently changed ones. It offers excellent spell checking, easy access to dictionary definitions, integration of stock quotes, street maps, telephone numbers and more. See Google's help page for an entire rundown on some of these

features. The Google Toolbar has also won a popular following for the easy access it provides to Google and its features directly from the Internet Explorer browser.

In addition to Google's unpaid editorial results, the company also operates its own advertising programs. The cost-per-click AdWords program places ads on Google as well as some of Google's partners. Similarly, Google is also a provider of unpaid editorial results to some other search engines. For a list of major partnerships, see the Search Providers Chart.

Google was originally a Stanford University project by students Larry Page and Sergey Brin called BackRub. By 1998, the name had been changed to Google, and the project jumped off campus and became the private company Google. It remains privately held today.

## **Yahoo <http://www.yahoo.com>**

Launched in 1994, Yahoo is the web's oldest "directory," a place where human editors organize web sites into categories. However, in October 2002, Yahoo made a giant shift to crawler-based listings for its main results. These came from Google until February 2004. Now, Yahoo uses its own search technology. Learn more in this recent review from our SearchDay newsletter, which also provides some updated submission details.

In addition to excellent search results, you can use tabs above the search box on the Yahoo home page to seek images, Yellow Page listings or use Yahoo's excellent shopping search engine. Or visit the Yahoo Search home page, where even more specialized search options are offered.

The Yahoo Directory still survives. You'll notice "category" links below some of the sites lists in response to a keyword search. When offered, these will take you to a list of web sites that have been reviewed and approved by a human editor.

It's also possible to do a pure search of just the human-compiled Yahoo Directory, which is how the old or "classic" Yahoo used to work. To do this, search from the Yahoo Directory home page, as opposed to the regular Yahoo.com home page. Then you'll get both directory category links ("Related Directory Categories") and "Directory Results," which are the top web site matches drawn from all categories of the Yahoo Directory.

Sites pay a fee to be included in the Yahoo Directory's commercial listings, though they must meet editor approval before being accepted. Non-commercial content is accepted for free. Yahoo's content acquisition program also offers paid inclusion, where sites can also pay to be included in Yahoo's crawler-based results. This doesn't guarantee ranking, Yahoo promises. The CAP program also bring in content from non-profit organizations for free.

Like Google, Yahoo sells paid placement advertising links that appear on its own site and which are distributed to others. Yahoo purchased Overture in October 2003.

Overture was formerly called GoTo until late 2001. More about it can be found on the Paid Listings Search Engines page. Overture purchased AllTheWeb (see below) in March 2003 and acquired AltaVista (see below) in April 2003. Now Yahoo owns these, gained as from its purchase of Overture.

Technology AltaVista and AllTheWeb was combined with that of Inktomi, a crawler-based search engine that grew out UC Berkeley and then launched as its own company in 1996, to make the current Yahoo crawler. Yahoo purchased Inktomi in March 2003.

## **Ask <http://www.ask.com>**

Ask Jeeves initially gained fame in 1998 and 1999 as being the "natural language" search engine that let you search by asking questions and responded with what seemed to be the right answer to everything.

In reality, technology wasn't what made Ask Jeeves perform so well. Behind the scenes, the company at one point had about 100 editors who monitored search logs. They then went out onto the web and located what seemed to be the best sites to match the most popular queries.

In 1999, Ask acquired Direct Hit, which had developed the world's first "click popularity" search technology. Then, in 2001, Ask acquired Teoma's unique index and search relevancy technology. Teoma was based upon the clustering concept of subject-specific popularity.

Today, Ask depends on crawler-based technology to provide results to its users. These results come from the Teoma algorithm, now known as ExpertRank.

## ***Strongly Consider***

The search engines below are other good choices to consider when searching the web.

## **AllTheWeb.com <http://www.alltheweb.com>**

Powered by Yahoo, you may find AllTheWeb a lighter, more customizable and pleasant "pure search" experience than you get at Yahoo itself. The focus is on web search, but news, picture, video, MP3 and FTP search are also offered.

AllTheWeb.com was previously owned by a company called FAST and used as a showcase for that company's web search technology. That's why you sometimes may sometimes hear AllTheWeb.com also referred to as FAST or FAST Search. However, the search engine was purchased by search provider Overture (see below) in late April 2003, then later become Yahoo's property when Yahoo bought Overture. It no longer has a connection with FAST.

## **AOL Search**

<http://aolsearch.aol.com> (internal)

<http://search.aol.com/>(external)

AOL Search provides users with editorial listings that come Google's crawler-based index. Indeed, the same search on Google and AOL Search will come up with very similar matches. So, why would you use AOL Search? Primarily because you are an AOL user. The "internal" version of AOL Search provides links to content only available within the AOL online service. In this way, you can search AOL and the entire web at the same time. The "external" version lacks these links. Why wouldn't you use AOL Search? If you like Google, many of Google's features such as "cached" pages are not offered by AOL Search.

## **HotBot <http://www.hotbot.com>**

HotBot provides easy access to the web's three major crawler-based search engines: Yahoo, Google and Teoma. Unlike a meta search engine, it cannot blend the results from all of these crawlers together. Nevertheless, it's a fast, easy way to get different web search "opinions" in one place.

HotBot's "choose a search engine" interface was introduced in December 2002. However, HotBot has a long history as a search brand before this date.

HotBot debuted in May 1996, it gained a strong following among serious searchers for the quality and comprehensiveness of its crawler-based results, which were provided by Inktomi, at the time. It also caught the attention of experienced web users and techies, especially for the unusual colors and interface it continues to sport today.

HotBot gained more notoriety when it switched over to using Direct Hit's "clickthrough" results for its main listings in 1999. Direct Hit was then one of the "hot" search engines that had recently appeared. Unfortunately, the quality of Direct Hit's results couldn't match those of another "hot" player that had debuted at the same time, Google. HotBot's popularity began to drop.

Even worse, HotBot also suffered by being owned by Lycos (now Terra Lycos). Lycos had acquired HotBot when it purchased Wired Digital in October 1998. Lycos failed to make search a priority on its flagship Lycos site as well as HotBot through much of 1999 and 2000, as it focused instead on adding "portal" features. The company refocused on search in late 2001, making significant improvements to the Lycos site and, as noted, reworked the HotBot site at the end of 2002.

## **Other Choices**

The sites below are "major" in the sense that they either still receive significant amounts of traffic or they've earned a reputation in the past that still causes some people to consider them to be important. For various reasons explained below, they are not among our top search choices. However, certainly feel free to try them. They could turn out to be top choices for you.

AltaVista

<http://www.altavista.com>

AltaVista opened in December 1995 and for several years was the "Google" of its day, in terms of providing relevant results and having a loyal group of users that loved the service.

Sadly, an attempt to turn AltaVista into a portal site in 1998 saw the company lose track of the importance of search. Over time, relevancy dropped, as did the freshness of AltaVista's listings and the crawler's coverage of the web.

Today, AltaVista is once again focused on search. Results come from Yahoo, and tabs above the search box let you go beyond web search to find images, MP3/Audio, Video, human category listings and news results. If you want a lighter-feel than Yahoo but to still have Yahoo's results, AltaVista is worth considering.

AltaVista was originally owned by Digital, then taken over by Compaq, when that company purchased Digital in 1998. AltaVista was later spun off into a private company, controlled by CMGI. Overture purchasing the search engine in April 2003, then it later became part of Yahoo when Yahoo bought Overture.

Gigablast

<http://www.gigablast.com>

Compared to Google, Yahoo or even Teoma, Gigablast has a tiny index of the web. However, the service is constantly gaining new and interesting features. Give it a whirl, if you want to try something experimental yet dependable. Read more about Gigablast in this recent interview from our SearchDay newsletter.

Live Search

<http://www.live.com/>

Live Search (formerly Windows Live Search) is the name of Microsoft's web search engine, successor to MSN Search, designed to compete with the industry leaders Google and Yahoo. The search engine offers some innovative features, such as the ability to view additional search results on the same web page (instead of needing to click through to subsequent search result pages) and the ability to adjust the amount of information displayed for each search-result (i.e. just the title, a short summary, or a longer summary). It also allows the user to save searches and see them updated automatically on Live.com.

The service was previously powered by LookSmart results and gained top marks for having its own team of editors that monitored the most popular searches being performed to hand-pick sites believed to be the most relevant. The system worked well.

LookSmart

<http://www.looksmart.com>

LookSmart is primarily a human-compiled directory of web sites. It gathers its listings in two ways. Commercial sites pay to be listed in its commercial categories, making the service very much like an electronic "Yellow Pages." However, volunteer editors at the LookSmart-owned Zeal directory also catalog sites into non-commercial categories for free. Though Zeal is a separate web site, its listings are integrated into LookSmart's results.

LookSmart launched independently in October 1996, was backed by Reader's Digest for about a year, and then company executives bought back control of the service.

LookSmart also bought the WiseNut crawler-based search engine in April 2002. WiseNut's are offered through the LookSmart via its Web tab above the search box. Unlike its competitors, the WiseNut crawler has often been out of date, sometimes for months at a time.

Finally, the real gem at LookSmart can be found via its Articles tab. That provides access to content from thousands of periodicals.

Lycos

<http://www.lycos.com>

Lycos is one of the oldest search engines on the web, launched in 1994. It ceased crawling the web for its own listings in April 1999 and instead provides access to human-powered results from LookSmart for popular queries and crawler-based results from Yahoo for others.

"Fast Forward" lets you see search results in one side of your screen and the actual pages listed in another. Relevant categories of human-compiled information from the Open Directory appear at the bottom of the search results page.

Lycos is owned by Terra Lycos, a company formed with Lycos and Terra Networks merged in October 2000. Terra Lycos also owns the HotBot search engine described above.

Netscape Search

<http://search.netscape.com>

Owned by AOL Time Warner, Netscape Search uses Google for its main listings, just as does AOL's other major search site, AOL Search. So why use Netscape Search rather than Google? Unlike with AOL Search, there's no compelling reason to consider it. The main difference between Netscape Search and Google is that Netscape Search will list some of Netscape's own

content at the top of its results. Netscape also has a completely different look and feel than Google. If you like either of these reasons, then try Netscape Search. Otherwise, you're probably better off just searching at Google.

Open Directory  
<http://dmoz.org/>

The Open Directory uses volunteer editors to catalog the web. Formerly known as NewHoo, it was launched in June 1998. It was acquired by AOL Time Warner-owned Netscape in November 1998, and the company pledged that anyone would be able to use information from the directory through an open license arrangement.

While you can search at the Open Directory site itself, this is not recommended. The site has no "backup" results that kick in should there not be a match in the human-compiled database. In addition, the ranking of sites during keyword searching is poor, while alphabetical ordering is used when you choose to "browse" categories by topic.

Instead, to scan the valuable information compiled by the Open Directory, consider using the version offered by Google, the Google Directory. Here, keyword searching uses Google's refined relevancy algorithms and makes use of link analysis to better propel good pages from the human database to the top. In addition, when viewing sites by category, they will be listed in PageRank order, which means the most popular sites based on analyzing links from across the web will be listed first.