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QUESTIONS

Column: Tips & Tricks

Nov. 01, 2007

In last month's column, I discussed how search engines find and catalog information on the Internet. Most search engines use automated spiders that constantly crawl around websites and follow links, indexing the content on each of the website pages. So how does knowing how search engines work help you find what you're looking for? Well, let's say you're a tax professional in Akron, but you have a client who relocated from California and you want to find out how that state handles AMT.

Okay, go to your favorite search engine (probably Yahoo!, Google, MSN or ASK) and type in California AMT. I received 1.8 million hits from Google. Why? Because even though I typed in two phrases, the search engine is basically returning all websites and online documents that its spiders (little web-scouring computer programs) have found that contain the word California or AMT or that have either word in their title or in the hidden "Meta tags" that are supposed to explain what the site is. That means that the pages you get as hits for your search might not even contain either word. So what now? Be overly specific.

California is pretty self-explanatory, but the acronym AMT, with a clearly defined meaning in the tax world, can mean a whole lot of things to other people. The website www.acronymfinder.com lists more than 250 definitions for AMT. What you really want to tell your search engine is that you want pages that have the word California and the acronym AMT, and that also have to do with income tax. The best way to do this is to spell out what the acronym stands for and use inclusive and exclusionary search terms, search phrases and other techniques.

To most search engines, the plus symbol (+) means that the search you are

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So, if after looking at the results, you don't find what you need, it's time to fine-tune the results by backing up to +California +“alternative minimum tax” and using other important search words.

Looking for income limits? Then add +“income limits”. Now the number of hits has gone back up, but among the top 10 are many government websites

that should be reliable. Is your client single, married or filing separately?

Include that in your search. The more terms you use, and the more that are mandated by the plus symbol (+), the fewer hits you will receive. Also consider including the source of the document, like FTB (California's Franchise Tax Board), or IRS, SSA, etc.

In addition to the plus symbol (+) denoting words or phrases that must be in a search return, the minus symbol (-) can be used on many search engines to filter pages out that contain the specified word. This would be useful if you were looking for information on a company in California named AMT, but that had nothing to do with income tax. Most of the major ones also offer advanced options that can be used to search for words, phrases and even numeric ranges in specified areas of web pages (like titles, headers, tags, etc.), or to search language-specific sites, or those with a dot-gov, dot-edu or other specific domain suffix.

Professional Resources

Of course, searching for specific tax information on Google or Yahoo! is not the most effective use of your time. Save the major search engines for looking up recipes, sports trivia or the capital of Moldova. Instead, utilize one of the many tax-specific research options for professionals. Most are subscription, but there are free and reliable online sources, including www.TaxAlmanac.org,

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least four or five keywords or phrases. Of course, if you get too specific, your result will be zero hits, which is about as helpful as 1.8 million. When this happens, I make my search less specific. Also, especially when using search phrases, think about how the words would likely appear in the context you are looking for it.

And then there's Wikipedia (www.en.wikipedia.org)

This not-so-little online resource has taken over the job of repository of all knowledge and history. Well, its goal is perhaps not so grand, but as an interactive, living encyclopedia, it allows users (experts, professionals, academics and novices alike) to edit and enter information, while other users can continually edit and monitor entries for factual correctness, neutral language and add citations, pictures and links to related information. If you've never heard of Wikipedia before and you have reservations after reading my description of it being user-edited, then do a Google or Yahoo! search for "accuracy of Wikipedia" (and remember to use the quotation marks). Number one on my search brought up a study commissioned by the British magazine *Nature* that showed that Wikipedia is comparable to the Encyclopedia Britannica in terms of overall accuracy. Now, it is more prone to temporary bad information, but users are identifiable, and editors are able to lock sensitive topics or breaking news items, and they can quickly remove erroneous information. So it's as good a reference as pretty much anything else online, including if you want to find out who won the World Series in 1924, what the capital of Chechnya is, or even look up a list of tax rates around the world. It also has the entire Internal Revenue Code and its history.

One last quick tip: CTRL+F. Hitting these two keys at the same time allows you to search for a word or phrase within a webpage, or in a PDF file, Word document or even a spreadsheet. It works for number combinations,

too.

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