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PRODUCT & SERVICE GUIDE

Back to the Basics: Internet Searching 101

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How good are you at searching for things online? Do you generally find what you need quickly, or does it sometimes take what seems like an eternity to finally realize success? Even worse, do you occasionally give up?

If you're not in the first group above, you have something in common with today's college students. I recently blogged about the results of a study of students at several universities that showed that these "net natives" aren't necessarily proficient with the online world. Well, perhaps it's more accurate to say that they aren't as productive and efficient with it.

Then again, kids/college students aren't accustomed to using the internet for productivity and efficiency, but rather for entertainment and social interaction. So it may be understandable that they haven't yet mastered those skills. But many experienced professionals are also challenged when it comes to finding either "the correct" results or reliable source material.

The problem starts with how much information is out there, but then reaches into how we have grown accustomed to searching for things online. Add to this a growing trend in making search engines more predictive, or smart (they say), and users can easily end up in a never-ending search trail.

Issue 1: How Search Engines Are Built

Most of the major search engines (Google, Bing, Yahoo!, etc.) work the same way. They build up their immense databases of links to websites by using little programs sometimes called bots or spiders that explore the internet on what might appear a random quest for information by following links to and from websites that they find. In addition to the links, they gather background data on the pages, such as headlines, titles, invisible tags that note what the content is about. They also tally the number of references to words, subjects and phrases. Yes, they've come a long way since the days of user-submitted links, but understanding them better will result in more fruitful queries.

Issue 2: How Search Engines Search

When users perform a search, the systems use more proprietary methods and formulas (algorithms) to sort through this aggregated information, with attention paid particularly to the frequency of the words in your search query, but also with regard to phraseology and sometimes the trustworthiness of a site. This does not,

however, mean that the links at the top of a search are definitely more pertinent to a search, or that they are reliable or safe.

Of course, there are also the sponsored links, which most adults should recognize as paid advertisements. If they've been placed well, they might reflect something you're interested in, but as with the regular search results, there's also a good chance that they will be way off the mark.

Issue 3: Intuitive/Smart Search Features

Start with the premise that search engines are dumb. They are not predictive, regardless of the marketing. Their algorithms simply tell it "if the user enters this, that and another term, then produce X." They are far more complex, but that's the basic structure. This means that if you type *apple orange banana* into Google, it assumes you're looking for information on recipes for smoothies. That great if that's what you're looking for, but not if you want information on produce or still-life artwork.

Improve Your Searches

To overcome the above issues, you don't need to get into deep tech issues, just remember a few tips that can be used on all search engines.

- 1) **Be specific.** If you type *tax worksheet* in the main search field on Google you will end up with about 10 million hits. Potentially complicating things further, the search engine knows where your IP address is, so it assumes you're a consumer looking for tax forms in your state. Starting over with a search for *1040 child tax credit worksheet*, however, still results in 279,000 results.
- 2) **Narrow your search.** While 279,000 results might be a little better, it's easy to get that down to a truly manageable number. Use the plus symbol (+) with no space before words that absolutely have to be in a search result. It's even better to use quotation marks around must-have phrases. So try this: *+1040 + "child tax credit worksheet."* That takes the results down to 15,000. Add additional words and phrases as necessary.
- 3) **Know the link source.** On Google search results pages, the URL for each is shown beneath the link. If you're searching for official forms, instructions or guidance on a tax subject, you probably want a reliable source, and the link will tell you immediately if it's an IRS, Treasury or other federal or state government page, a

vendor you trust, or perhaps something linking to Russia (don't ever click on a .ru website).

4) **Use advanced search tools.** Each of the major search engines includes advanced search functions that make it fairly simple to add “must have” words and phrases, to ignore websites that have particular words or phrases, where the keywords should appear (title, text, URL, etc.), and even file types and languages. You can also tell it to only search for results on specific types of websites (such as .gov).

5) **Automated searches.** With Google Alerts, you can also set up automatic searches where the system sends you an email or shows the results on your iGoogle page. With this feature, you can set the frequency of a search you might want done every few weeks (such as +“new tax law” +“New York”). You can also limit the search to news, blogs or other content types.

Specialized Research

There are also several research tools designed specifically for tax and accounting professionals, providing access to source documents, court rulings, expert guidance, case studies and more. Our annual review of tax research systems will appear in our December issue. The most important factor in finding whatever it is you want online is to first know what you don't know, and then use the right language and tricks when you go on the hunt.

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