

LESSON 28

USING SEARCH ENGINES

Today I want talk about looking for information on the Internet and using search engines. Exactly what is a search engine? Search engines use software programs developed to help you locate specific information on the more than 320 million web pages that exist today. Both Netscape and Internet Explorer have "search" buttons you can click on. The trouble is that a simple web search may result in much more information than you can handle.

Usually one of two technologies are used to search for information. AltaVista, Excite and Lycos search engines use software known as "spiders", "robots" and "crawlers" that constantly search the World Wide Web and other parts of the Internet to create an index or catalog of sites. These catalogs are based on words contained in the various sites. For example, AltaVista looks at every word on every page 24 hrs a day and currently contains more than 30 million listings.

The other search engine type is called a directory. Yahoo is the largest and most popular directory search engine, containing about 500,000 listings divided into 25,000 categories. Searches on directory-based search engines tend to be more concise than their spider or crawler counterparts.

Lycos is an example of a search engine that has both technologies. It has a crawler to automatically locate sites, and web guides organized by subject. Your search request to the Lycos home page is sent to the Lycos structured database and then to the automated listings uncovered by the "crawler" section of the search engine.

Here's an example of how to use a search engine. If you were looking for the United Airlines home page, typing United at the AltaVista site would yield about 13 million sites. If you typed United Airlines you'd get about the same amount but sites related to United Airlines would appear toward the top of the information available. Placing the words United Airlines in quotes would produce about 36,000 sites from the database. That's a lot less than 13 million but still too much information.

Searching for United Airlines at the Yahoo web site would produce 24 listings, with the United Airlines home page being first on the list. The lesson here is that Yahoo is great for finding companies and organizations, while other sites are better at finding information on more obscure topics that is the strong point of crawler sites.

Search engine web sites have help buttons that can assist you in narrowing your search. You can go directly to these search engine sites by requesting locations like www.yahoo.com. Some of these sites offer so-called Boolean logic searches, which let you use modifiers like "and", "or", "not" and "near".

You might want to take a look at www.hotbot.com for powerful questions, like "who invented the typewriter"? It's www.aj.com. Good hunting!

