

Wall Street Journal

Ask.Com's New Look Scores Big Points Against Search Rivals

Walt Mossberg

3/30/06

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB114367958939011763.html?mod=technology_featured_stories_hs

In college basketball this month, we've all been reminded that the superiority of champions can't be taken for granted. During the NCAA tournament, George Mason University, an obscure team from the suburbs of Washington, D.C., has defeated both the reigning champion, North Carolina, and the team many assumed would win it all this year, Connecticut.

That's also true in high tech. Every so often, an underestimated contender rises up to compete with a champion play for play, or even to beat the champ. Something like that is happening in the search business.

Ask Jeeves, a largely failed search service, has been overhauled and renamed Ask.com. I've been testing the new Ask.com against the search champ, Google. I've found that in terms of relevant results and ease of use, Ask holds its own with Google, and even beats the champ on some searches. It has some very nice features Google lacks, including previews of the sites it finds, an easy way to narrow or broaden your search results, and frequent top-of-the-screen answers that lead you directly to core information.

Ask.com is starting from a low ranking. According to a recent study, Ask has only about 6% of the search market, compared with 41% for Google and 29% for Yahoo. Yet, Ask.com is improving fast, and is capable of playing above its ranking.

In its old incarnation, Ask Jeeves, I never could recommend the service. It was cluttered with ads that were too easily confused with real search results and that made the real results hard to find. And it was based on a questionable promise -- that it could answer queries stated as English-language questions. While it did that in some cases, it failed in many others.

This year, the name has been changed and the logo, a cartoon butler named Jeeves, has been axed. The whole question-answering approach is now de-emphasized.

But the overhaul has been far more than just marketing. Ads have been cut back to just three at the top and five at the bottom of each page, and they run on a colored background so you know they're not real search results. Instead of running ads down the right side of the page, as Google does, Ask uses that space to help the user refine search results.

In general, Ask's search-results pages are richer and better organized than typical Google results, and they give greater priority to content over ads.

Here's an example. I searched for Ted Williams, the Red Sox outfielder who was the greatest hitter of all time. In Google, I got a plain results page topped by a link to the official site on Williams, with a few ads down the right side for Williams-related items.

In Ask.com, the top of the page, above the ads, featured a Smart Answer box that included a picture of Ted, an excerpt from a biography, direct links to his official site, an encyclopedia article and other images of him.

Down the side, where Google ran ads, Ask.com had links to many related topics that could narrow or broaden my search, a feature called Zoom. These suggested topics included the Red Sox, Fenway Park and even Cryonics, a controversial technique for freezing the dead that was used on Williams after he passed away. There were also entries for Ted's rivals, like Joe DiMaggio and Mickey Mantle.

Google and Yahoo have features similar to Ask's Smart Answer, but Ask uses it much more often and with better effect.

Other search engines have tried things similar to Ask's Zoom, but I found Ask's implementation to be better than any other I've tested.

In the search results on my Ted Williams query, Ask listed links that were at least as relevant as Google's. Unlike Google, Ask allowed me to preview most of the links without leaving the search-results page. To use this feature, called Binoculars, I just moused over a small icon of binoculars in each result and a miniature image of the page popped up.

I did many other searches, with roughly similar results. Google usually did a good job, but Ask usually did just as well, and its added features made the results more valuable. In a search for a particular digital camera, Ask's page was topped by a picture of the camera, with links to reviews and price comparisons. Google's page was topped by ads, followed by links to specific shopping sites.

In a search on the word Providence, Google offered a map link at the top, then a link to Providence College. Ask featured a Smart Answer box with the start of an encyclopedia article on the Rhode Island capital, and a drop-down list of links to other cities named Providence and to the TV show of that name.

Ask also allows you to save any entry in its search results to a special page called MyStuff. You can also save pictures, and even upload your browser bookmarks, then organize everything into folders.

Google is still great, and I'm not suggesting everyone abandon it. But Ask.com is well worth a try if you want to benefit from some features that go beyond Google. Like the George Mason basketball team, it just may surprise you.