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## askSam 2.0 A Powerful Search Engine for Your Email

(c)1994 by *Angela Lilleystone*

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*Editorial Note: The Problem...The Internet with its vast array of options for access to information creates an email nightmare. Retrieval of information is the name of the new Internet game! Organization for retrieval and reference must be kept current for practical access that reflects the incredible leaps of ever changing technology and interests. The increasing need to maintain records of email exchanges makes the search for sophisticated tools an overriding necessity.*

*Software developers who are attempting to deal with the dynamic and complex nature of email are truly making a courageous contribution to the ongoing information revolution. Angela Lilleystone brings integrity and vast experience with Personal Information Management to bear in this evaluation.*

### EMAIL - THE NATURE OF THE BEAST!

Email messages come in a variety of incompatible formats: Internet, CompuServe, the Quick format, cc:Mail -- to name a few. Some produce a massive amount of routing information, headers, signatures and taglines that can easily overwhelm the several lines of content. Over the years I have saved thousands such messages -- and have used about the same number of tools as there were email formats to manage them. The prospect of trying to find specific information was daunting.

Today, thanks to askSam, I can search for *modem* and *COM* (but not *COM3* or *COM4*) in the same paragraph across several years worth of email messages. This simple, but powerful query will quickly find problems users have come across when setting up their modem on COM 1 or COM 2.

askSam has long been known to those who need to manage large amounts of textual information. Unlike traditional databases, askSam's strength lies in its ability to combine free form text and structured data. As users of askSam were quick to discover, this makes email management a particularly suitable application. askSam listened and as a result askSam for Windows 2.0 now offers several new tools for on-line users and includes ready-to-use Internet and email templates to get you started. Add to that a powerful search engine and a built in word processor that doubles as the user interface, and you have a tool that lets you get a handle on your email, no matter where it originated.

## **GETTING READY**

**Your first step will be to import your messages into one or more askSam files. askSam will directly import Nexis, Lexis and CompuServe Information Manager (CIM) files. Other proprietary email formats need first to be saved as text. Each imported message or file becomes a record in askSam's database.**

**In dealing with email from a variety of sources, I found it most effective to create a separate file for each on-line and mail service. The resulting consistency in fields and field delimiters allows for painless imports in the future without ever again having to worry about how you've set up your file.**

**Another new feature in askSam 2.0 is hypertext. You can, for instance, create a separate file that serves as a menu of your email files. You start by placing a bookmark at the beginning of each previously created file. After typing a name for your menu item, it takes only one keystroke to designate the corresponding bookmark as the target of a hypertext link.**

## **BUILDING YOUR DATABASE**

**New in this release are on-line specific import filters for Lexis (a legal information system), Nexis (which offers articles of newspapers and magazines) and CompuServe Information Manager (CIM). The CompuServe import filter is a delight. It allows one to import \*.MSG, \*.PLX, \*.THD, \*.ART and \*.NWS files. One has to wonder why no product did this before.**

**Another useful tool in the import facility allows you to define a string of characters, hyphens, for example, as a document delimiter. This is good news for those who are using mail readers that allow for appending messages to an ASCII file. askSam can separate those lengthy files into individual messages on import. Another option allows you to select all files in a given directory, making imports a snap.**

**Once you imported your messages you will want to set up fields for the creation of reports. Any character suitable to distinguish a field can serve as a field delimiter. A typical example is the colon that is often used in email headers' "Date:" and "Subject:" fields. The new Automatic Field Recognition feature scans your documents for such delimiters and generates a list from which you can pick the fields relevant to you. You can easily create additional fields by typing a new field name somewhere into the text.**

## **BRINGING YOUR DATA TO LIFE**

**askSam includes an optional command line. The command line comes in handy**

for quick searches, such as a wildcard search. For instance, *file \*corrupt\** would find any message containing *corrupt*, *corrupted*, or *corrupts* as well as *file* or *files*. Likewise the command line proved to be the easiest way to get a list of, let's say, all subject headers.

askSam's search engine offers a wide variety of methods. All searches can be conducted through either dialog boxes or the command line. Search methods include date searches, searches in fields, numeric searches and Boolean searches. For example, *Miller NOT Peter* will help you find all occurrences of Miller, but skip messages from Peter Miller.

The hyper search, a command you can select from the popup menu, allows you to select any word or phrase in a document and will then take you to the next occurrence of the selected text. I found proximity searches to be particularly useful in dealing with email. Those allow you to search for one word in a specified distance from another, such as *asprice* within two sentences of *modem*. The multiple search dialog allows for combining two or more of those methods and you need to use it for searching across multiple files. You can save searches for future use.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its impressiveness, there were a few disappointments, most notably the absence of fuzzy searches, vital if you don't know the spelling of the word you are looking for. Also missing are weighted matches that show you which text contains what you are looking for more often than any other. It should be added, though, that frequency of occurrence has shown to have a low bearing on relevance of information. Further, askSam will take you to the first document that contains the match by default before proceeding to the next match. As a result, search results cannot be used to further narrow down your search. Despite these shortcomings I was always able to locate quickly what I was looking for. It has been shown that 80% of all queries are two term searches. askSam is more than capable of giving you those results.

To get a listing of your search results you must create a report. Report creation is as easy as drag and drop. Once you have created a report, for instance a listing of message subjects, sorted by date, the underlying hypertext engine automatically creates links between the report and the underlying message. This allows one to jump from the report directly to a message by double clicking on the report listing. Tiling your report and message windows allows you to conveniently browse information.

## AN EXCURSION ON ASKSAM'S LEARNING CURVE

My editor claims that askSam is demanding of effort and that the learning curve is substantial. Having conducted usability studies and having consulted with database and PIM (Personal Information Manager) developers in relationship to Windows user interfaces, I responded by saying that it was the menu design that created this impression. Our resulting discussions at [WindoWatch](#) led us believe we should share with our readers a look at how learning curve and interface design interact.

Despite recent advances in making software more user friendly it remains an unrealistic expectation to buy a database product with a sophisticated search engine and expect there to be no learning curve. Many components shape the learning curve of software, one of them being perception. This is easy to illustrate. For example, askSam's user guide contains a tutorial that takes under three hours to complete. This makes the effort to learn the program's features identical to that of, let's say, learning CrossTies 1.0 (which we reviewed in the WW October Preview issue). Yet CrossTies is generally considered to have "no learning curve."

What accounts for such difference?

While the Windows version of askSam has improved greatly over its DOS sibling, I found the biggest obstacle to be the menu and the dialog boxes, specifically the grouping and naming of certain commands. askSam is not a difficult to master program, but it does lack intuitiveness. The problem arises in part because of askSam's unique database/word processor metaphor. Let's look at the Page Setup command as an example.

In askSam the Page Setup command is on the File menu. This command allows for setting document options for the entire file. Additionally, each individual documents can have a Page Setup different from the default. Both dialogs being identical, it is only logical they were grouped together. In the Windows environment this can lead to problems. The user interface being a word processor leads the user to look for certain functions on the same menu where they are used to finding this function in their word processor. For instance, in Winword the Page Setup command is on the Format menu.

Our fictitious Winword user will feel right at home with the word processor interface. So much so, that when he wants to change the margin of a particular document he will automatically pull down the...Format menu. Note that askSam has a Format menu as well, albeit minus the PageSetup command. "Stuck" in the word processor mode, he will not, at least for a moment, consider the fact that the document in front of him is a record in a database.

The impact of such details on the use of software can be pervasive, yet it is unrelated to the learning curve. There is nothing difficult about setting up your page -- the learning curve is close to zero. However, the confusion based on the menu design can persist long after you have mastered how to accomplish the task. The distinction between learning curve and non-intuitive interface design is an important one. Changes to the way a program accomplishes certain tasks can be difficult, if not impossible, to implement. Making adjustments to the interface is a far easier undertaking.

## **INVESTMENT PAYS OFF**

askSam's user guide includes an tutorial and well-written step-by-step instructions for many tasks, such as import, export and searches. Those step-by-step guides are also included in the context-sensitive online help. If you are new to the on-line world, or your amount of email is moderate a good mail reader may be all you need for now. If, on the other hand, you are overwhelmed by email or would like to store all those gems you find on-line for reference, then askSam is a tool that deserves your serious consideration. You will find the initial time spent for getting acquainted with askSam and for setting up your data to be worthwhile.

**Return in this investment will pay off in efficient retrieval of information!**

**askSam for Windows 2.0**

**List price: \$149.95 single user; network version available.**

**Minimum system requirements:**

**MS Windows 3.1; 4 MB RAM; 4 MB hard disk space,**

**askSam Systems**

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