

How do you successfully tap into the vast information resources available on the Internet? With a few practical examples, Terry Pinnell illustrates how to pursue your on-line targets methodically

after hours on line

Special

Using the numerous powerful Net search facilities that I outlined recently in *After Hours On Line* takes some practice. There are no golden rules to guarantee success, as the best approach depends heavily on the nature of your query. But there are some useful techniques and guidelines, especially covering the all important aspect of entering optimum search criteria.

How do you even define 'success' in this context, though? I'd say it was finding enough relevant information considerably faster and at much lower cost than by conventional means.

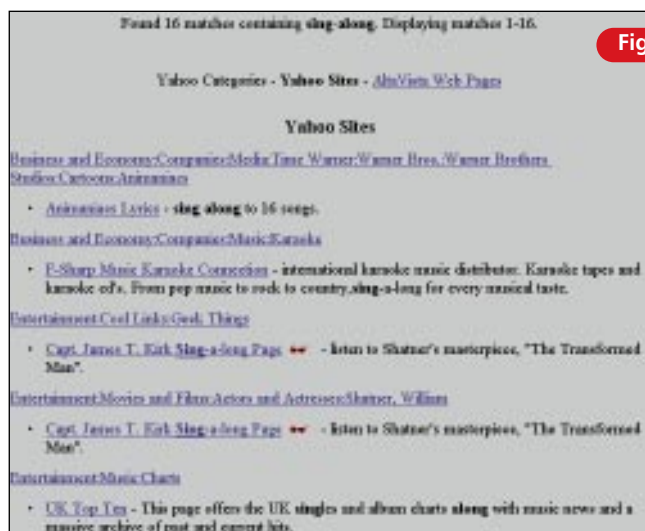
The qualifier 'enough' is significant, because sometimes you need quantity as well as quality. Suppose you're looking for Birmingham-based solicitors who have e-mail addresses, so that you could send an urgent request for advice in the morning, hoping to study answers at home that evening. Finding five addresses would be more of a success than finding one – other things being equal. If all five prove to be in Birmingham, Alabama, then your search entry was poorly constructed.

It's a hit, Jim, but not as we know it ...

Take the very simple case of seeking information that you know exists on the Web; you've seen it recently but just can't remember where. In my case, during the course of writing a piece last week, I wanted to check a page I'd previously visited, but I'd wiped its details from my hard disk. I'd even written about this site briefly in *What PC?*, but had lent that issue to a friend. The only things I could remember were that it contained a list of what its author bravely called 'cool' sites, and that one of these was something about Star Trek Captain Kirk's 'Sing-along-page'.

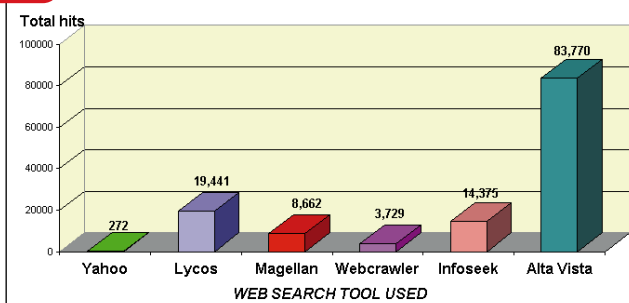
Entering 'Star Trek', 'Kirk', or 'cool' in the keyword field of any of the major search engines would generate an overwhelming number of totally irrelevant hits. Even a Boolean search using 'Kirk' AND 'cool', which some of the engines can handle in their advanced syntax modes, would be unprofitable; on Trekkies' pages those two words are as tightly coupled as Games and Olympics are to the rest of us. Clearly, the entry would have to focus on the 'sing-along' fragment. I fired up Microsoft Internet Explorer, staying off-line for a while to minimise phone costs, opened Yahoo's home page from the files stored on my local HD, and entered my guess of 'Sing-along', as shown in **Fig 1**. I then dialled my Internet connection and clicked on Yahoo's search button. Thirty seconds later (this was at 7am, while the Americans were asleep, so traffic was relatively light), I had my results – including a direct hit. However, as you can see from **Fig 2**, Yahoo ignored the hyphen, and produced 16 results with either 'sing' or 'long' or both, in either the title or the content. Of these, three were identical, just listed under different Yahoo categories.

I repeated the same simple search with other engines. Yahoo's database is based on vetted submissions, mainly from commercial sites, so not surprisingly you get far more hits when you search the larger databases of other less selective tools. But I was surprised by the sheer scale of the difference; Alta Vista, for example, reported about 6,000 hits, as shown in **Fig 3**. The first screen of the Alta Vista results also illustrates another obvious but important point: being on the Web doesn't mean



that a page is accurate or properly updated, so results can be misleading. At the time of writing, that 'coming attraction' in the first hit is already eight months gone.

Fig 4 Simple search for keyword "Posters"



- Fig 5** Art, Limited Editions, Posters, New Releases, Original...
[LeMay Movie Posters - SciFi, Disney, Musical, Comedy,...](#)
[ROCKY MOUNTAIN TRADING CARD CO., INC](#)
[Movie Posters - LE VIVID GALLERY](#)
[Fauna of Tasmania](#)
[Joel Rane's Groovy Horror Page](#)
[Rainbow Color System - Posters](#)
[INSPIRATIONAL CHRISTIAN POSTERS - Surround Yourself With...](#)
[The Outdoor Advertising Medium](#)
[World War II Propaganda Posters](#)
[Roman Sports Graphics](#)
[Paul's Local Music Store Guide](#)
[Class Act Movie Posters - Home Page](#)
[Web posters -\(homepage\)](#)
[Radiation Protection in Neighbouring Countries in Central...](#)
[Gilles Didier Original Old Posters & Artworks Chéret -...](#)
[Movie Poster Hotlist](#)
[Category Listings](#)
[Northland Poster Collective](#)
[SATELLITE DESIGN](#)
[The Poster Hall Of Fame\(tm\)](#)
[List of posters](#)
[The preparation of scientific posters: A guide for...](#)
[International Centre for Conservation Education](#)
[1st Electronic Computational Chemistry Conference Announc...](#)
[MEDNET 96 - European Congress of the Internet in Medicine](#)
[Call for Posters](#)

Fig 6



Fig 7 Searching for phrase: art poster gallery



Results

Searching for phrase: abstract art posters

Sorry-- your search yielded no results. Please try again...

Results

Searching for phrase: modern art posters

Sorry-- your search yielded no results. Please try again...

Results

Searching for phrase: abstract art

Returned 1912 matches.

Fig 9



Frame up

We need a few pictures for a couple of walls in our lounge – I thought I'd try the Web. I've also been toying with an associated idea: taking photos of the white-painted walls, including also the suite, carpets, curtains, etc, and loading these onto my PC as images. I've no scanner or digital camera, so this could herald my first use of Boots' Photo CD service. Having downloaded a wide choice of posters, I'll then be able to drag and drop scaled versions onto the walls, until satisfied with pictures that also complement the room. So I need sites with lots of fine art images. Ideally, I'd like to place my order for pictures and framing on line, but I'll be content to do that with a shop or mail order supplier.

It's usually a good idea to start off with a crude search, just to get a flavour. So my first step was a simple search on 'posters' – see **Fig 4**. Clearly, more precise criteria were necessary if I was to avoid wading through piles of the sort of irrelevant stuff you can see in **Fig 5**. However, a problem you encounter when making these so-called 'advanced' searches is the inconsistent syntax adopted by the search tools. For example, take Infoseek and Excite. They're similar in some respects, such as both letting you use a '+' prefix to ensure a word is always included in the hits – the equivalent of a Boolean AND. Yet only Excite allows the use of proper Boolean operators AND, OR, NOT and brackets.

Using Infoseek, I next entered the criteria shown in **Fig 6**, to get pages definitely containing both the word 'posters' and the phrase 'fine art', either lower case or capitalised. There were 522 results found, in which there were several excellent hits. Prompted by seeing the word 'gallery' frequently, I then tried it as part of an even more specific phrase. Out of curiosity I used the relatively new engine, Hotbot. **Fig 7** illustrates how you can easily go too far in narrowing the focus, in this case getting only two hits, both irrelevant. Similar results are seen in **Fig 8**, using other narrow phrases, yet broadening the entry to 'abstract art' produced many hits. I also tried using some of the directories and categories that many of the search tools offer. For example, first selecting the 'Arts' category in Yahoo eliminates much redundant material, although you unavoidably then risk missing some relevant sites.

I found many useful pages with these more selective criteria, including Fine Art Prints and Poster Gallery. A small selection of the resulting portfolio of possible posters is shown in **Fig 9**. At some stage, drills and rawlplugs or hammers and hooks will have to enter the picture, so to speak, but until then I'll hang a virtual gallery in our little lounge – courtesy of the World Wide Web.