

TechMatters: What Happened to Jeeves, you Ask.com?

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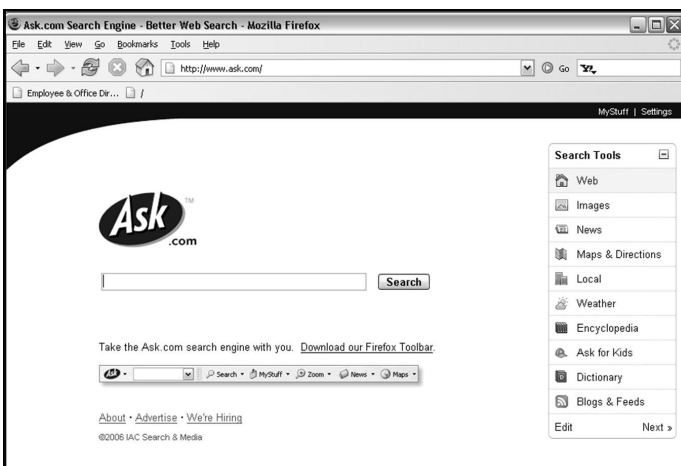
Do you remember Ask Jeeves, the search engine that offered searchers the opportunity to pose questions in the form of full sentences, but never managed to produce many sensible “answers” in return? I was never very impressed by the quality of this search tool, and so stopped using it and teaching it to my students many years ago.

In February of 2006, however, the search engine best known for its snooty butler branding underwent a major change when “Jeeves” was dismissed and the search engine was renamed as Ask.com. At the same time, a new and more effective search algorithm was quietly implemented. The change in the quality of the search results is impressive, and makes giving this search engine a second look and a new review worth the time. After checking out the new and improved search features, you may find that you want to share this quality web search option with your students.

New interface, new algorithm, better search results

The first thing you will notice when you visit the new Ask.com is the clean, simple search interface. The home page contains only a simple web search form, with options to search using other information sources including an image search, a dictionary and thesaurus, an encyclopedia, and a phone directory amongst others (see **Figure 1**). Sound familiar? The surface similarities to Google, the reigning champion of search engines, are obvious and seem designed to invite comparison.

Figure 1: Ask.com home page



Fortunately for Ask.com, the similarities between the two tools extend well beyond the surface level and into the quality of the search results. Try a search for “library instruction” in the two search engines and you will find that the results are incredibly similar. Gone are the non-sensical search results produced by the old Ask Jeeves. The dramatically improved search relevancy is due to Ask.com’s new “ExpertRank” search algorithm. Similar to Google’s much lauded “PageRank” technology, Ask.com’s new search algorithm uses link popularity to determine relevance. Ask.com’s algorithm goes one step further, however, by using subject clusters to rank pages based on link popularity amongst “expert pages” within the subject area being searched. In other words, being popular amongst peer web pages is weighted more heavily than general popularity. Thus for many searches while there will not be a significant difference from Google, in certain instances Ask.com’s approach should allow niche sites that are well-regarded by their peers, as opposed to all websites, to bubble up closer to the top.

New search features, improved search experience

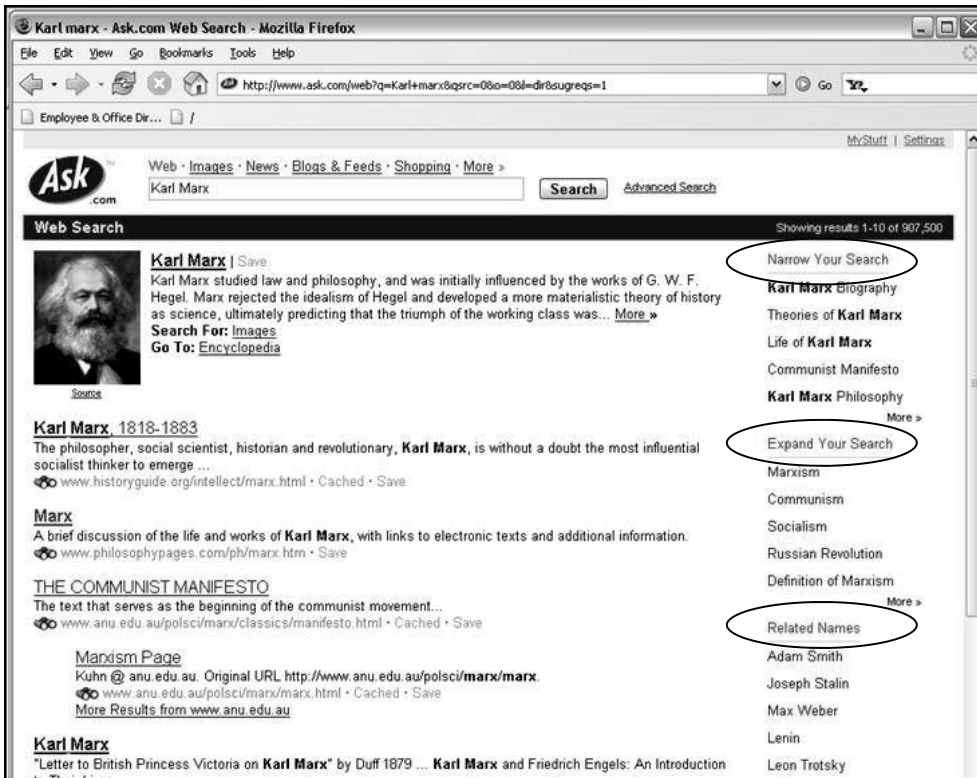
Along with the new search algorithm and relevancy ranking, Ask.com has also introduced a few new search features that aren’t currently available in any other major search engine.

Zoom Related Search

Because Ask.com’s search relevancy is based on subject-specific popularity, it is able to leverage the same subject clusters to suggest alternate search terms. For example, a search for “Karl Marx” produces the typical list of ranked web sites about Marx and his works just like any other search engine. However, along the right-hand side of the screen you will find three sets of possible alternate search options (see **Figure 2**):

- Narrow your search provides a list of more focused search topics such as “Karl Marx biography” or “theories of Karl Marx”.
- Expand your search provides a list of conceptually related search topics that may not even include the initial search terms, such as “Marxism”, “communism”, and “socialism”.

Figure 2: Three Sets of Alternate Search Options



- Finally, the related names section provides a list of individuals who are conceptually related to topics areas suggested in the previous two categories. In this case you will find “Adam Smith”, “Joseph Stalin”, “Max Weber”, and others. The potential benefits of this search feature for students who often struggle to appropriately refine and redefine their research topics and terms are clear.

Binoculars Site Preview

Another new feature, site preview, allows users to get a “sneak peek” at a web page prior to connecting to a selected site. To access this feature look for the small binoculars icon that appears next to the URL on most search results. Hover your mouse over the icon and a preview image will appear for the site in question. While the quality of the images will vary depending on the screen resolution, it is generally good enough to allow for a quick surface level evaluation that may help weed out sites with limited content or poor design thereby saving the time of a searcher.

And a variety of specialized search options ...

Like Google, Ask.com’s search engine also allows users to search a variety of specialized information sources including weather reports, a currency converter, stock reports, and a unit conversion tool. However, instead of expecting users to read help screens in order to discover and learn how to use these search options, Ask.com provides easily accessible and intuitive search interfaces for each one. Simply select the tool you want from a “search tools” menu prominently located on the main search screen, and follow the clear search prompts to find the quick answers you need.

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After reviewing the new and improved search features implemented by Ask.com this year, I plan to begin re-introducing my students to this search option. From my perspective, the more quality web search tools available to students the better. And really, competition in the search engine domain will benefit all of us, as leaders like Google will be pushed to continue to improve their search technology. So, I urge you to take another look at the “jeevesless” Ask.com. Like me, you may be favorably impressed by what you find!