Online Search Engines: the Road to Success
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Online searching has become one of the main activities of surfers, before reading any information or buying a product or service. This habit has placed the search engines very near the customers, which constitutes their main strength and has pushed the Internet giants into the online search engine business.

However, although it is quite obvious that the search engines create value, it is not so clear that they are able to retain it. In fact, a search engine is a place to visit, a place the user will inevitably leave as soon as he has found what he is looking for. Moreover, the loyalty of the surfer towards a certain search engine is quite limited, so he goes right for the best search technology. This we saw some years ago when Google left Altavista—the number one search engine at the time—in a precarious situation.

That is how it goes; the only way to reach the customer is to be the number one search engine. Up to now Google has been the indisputable king, which has turned it into the technology supplier of many other Internet heavyweights. However, the role of search engine is too important to leave it in the hands of third parties, who could quickly go from being a “coopetitor” to being a rival. That is why Google has more and more competitors who have launched their own search engine like Yahoo!, Microsoft and Amazon.

However, there is hardly enough market for all of them and history shows that so far only the best technology wins. Right now you can see all kinds of strategies that are trying to break the predominance of the technological criterion through several attempts at making customers loyal.

Yahoo’s ploy, for instance, is a portal full of content (news, games, maps, shops) and services (forums, instant messaging, e-mail) in which the search facility is just another component. Microsoft gathers all of this in its MSN search engine and has decided to bet on the user’s commodity to search the net by integrating a search engine in the desktop of Longorn, its new operating system.

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**Highlights**

1. According to a study by Pew Internet and American Life Project, searching is the main online activity: 84% of North American surfers have used a search engine. Google is the most used (47%) followed by Yahoo! (26%). MSN comes in third (7%) and AOL trails in fourth position (5%).

2. In the same search A9 gathers in a single interface the results thrown up by Google, the Internet Movie Database, the GuruNet.com dictionary and the Amazon store. The browser also allows users who register to store the searches carried out in the Internet as well as favourites and any comments they wish to add on.

3. Amazon wants to take advantage of the lucrative intersection that is produced between search and electronic commerce: many users employ a search engine to reach a product or service. A9 bases itself on the history of each user to recommend new content, a strategy that places it in an enviable position to show offers to consumers.

4. Like Google and most of the search engines, the new A9 will earn its income from related advertisements that appear together with the list of results of a search. This business took in 1.400 million dollars for Google last year.
The strategy of the giant from Redmond is the most serious threat to Google as it could repeat Explorer’s success. Bill Gates’s company exploited the very high penetration its Windows operating system had among home users to promote its browser, which it overwhelmingly achieved. In order to prevent Microsoft from beating it in the same way, Google has already announced that in the near future its search engine would allow users to look for information in web pages as well as in their own hard disk.

For its part, A9, Amazon’s search engine, offers users the possibility of storing their search history and favourites in the net, so they are available from any device connected to the Internet. For the moment Google does not see any danger in Amazon’s incursion in the search engine business. In fact, it provides A9 with its search results and shares the income derived from publicity.

However, A9 introduces a new dimension into the online search: personalisation. To do so, Amazon uses its technology to analyse profiles and histories and recommends content related with the users’ search, which places it in an enviable position to offer them products they could be interested in buying. Although it does not look like this new feature worries the online behemoths, who have not announced the introduction of similar services, the truth is that it adds a new angle to the online search.

In short, whether it is based on content, integration or personalisation, the strategy of the online giants is to become the reference search engine. Now we must wait and see which of them the surfers will choose. The winner will have a lot going for it: nothing less than being the access to the Internet.