



## What are the best practices in web site search?

One of the keys to improving discovery on a site is allowing a mixture of search and navigation. Ten key parts of such an integrated approach are:

**Search box** – One of the cardinal rules of web site usability is to have a simple search box in the same place on every page. The query language should understand basic web conventions, such as the use of quotes to search for phrases, and doing ANDs instead of ORs when multiple search terms are entered. The query tool should also have a thesaurus of synonyms, so that regardless of the term a user types in, the search resolves to the preferred term.

**Best bets** – Analyze the query logs to see what terms are most searched for, and prepare special answers for those common queries. That analysis can also help generate synonyms for the query tool's thesaurus.

**Meaningful result order** – Google's success is largely due to their algorithm for putting results into order. De-duplicating the results and ordering them so that the right items appear in the top ten results is important since people rarely look any further than that. This is one of the trickiest parts of configuring a search engine.

**Last updated** – The results page should tell the user how fresh the information is, by giving the time since it was last modified.

**Meaningful titles and descriptions** – These are also key to the usability of the search results. If the content is not authored so that these can be reliably extracted, they must be provided manually or semi-automatically.

**Facet browsing with counts** – Content in a site can be categorized by several independent facets, such as document type, organizational unit, people, places, products, audience, chronology, etc. Recently, commercial software has become available which lets people navigate through the content collection according to those facets. The software gives feedback to the user by providing constantly updated counts of the numbers of documents remaining as the user drills down into the collection by the different facets. Key vendors in this space are Endeca and Thunderstone, with Siderean, i411, and Verity meriting consideration.

**Site navigation** – While facet navigation is the most powerful technique, people are still most familiar with a single hierarchical navigation scheme. In addition to topics, the navigation menu should contain extras, such as a site map, an A-Z list of topics, etc.

**Inline links** – When the content mentions people, places, and things that are part of the subject taxonomies, there should be links to key documents like bios of important people, or summary pages for those topics.

**Links to related content** – Amazon's "People who bought X have also bought Y" is one successful technique for showing links to related content that is not directly mentioned in the current page. Relations within the subject taxonomies are another source for generating this kind of link.

**Subscriptions** – Leading sites allow visitors to enter their email address to subscribe to feeds of content of specific types.

