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Introduction

This report examines the search engines of 10 popular Web sites. We selected the subjects based on their diversity — from academic, to media, to consumer technology. But we also sought out similarities in purpose: Each site is focused on aiding users in their tasks and goals by delivering content. We found that strategies for content search differ significantly from those for products (e-commerce), events (travel), or pure data (finance).

We investigated these content-search strategies by analyzing and scoring each site's search engine using a number of criteria:

- user interfaces for entering queries
- layout and features of results pages
- quality of results and ranking algorithms
- how site architecture was reflected in the results set
- special features like handpicked results and search tips
- overall user experience

This data was then cut two ways: First, we took a broad look at each site. Who used it? What were users trying to do there? Could they do it? Then, we inventoried every feature of each site's complete search experience, from the mundane to the critical.

What you'll find

This report is divided into three sections, and each serves as a unique reference for improving the search experience on your site:

Eight steps to a better search engine

The report begins with a collection of quick wins for you to put into practice immediately. Some are more involved than others, but even if

you implement only a few of them, your site's search experience will improve. As a companion, we've included a wireframe of a generic search page that embodies our best practices and recommendations. Consider it a starting point — the basic recipe from which you can evolve your own solutions.

Site-by-site overview

This section highlights the strengths and weakness of each site's search experience, providing a holistic view of how sites implement their search technology. But even more importantly, it gives you a chance to see how those technologies fit into the context of the site: That is, how the search-engine features match the business needs of the organization and the goals of the intended audience. You'll find that the only rule in search design — and Web design in general — is “it depends.” A complex query language is appropriate for an academic audience searching the works of William Shakespeare, but it's nearly useless at a “Give me the latest now!” site like CNN.com. What's best for one audience may not work at all for another.

Feature-by-feature analysis

Use this inventory when developing the search experience on your site; it is intended as a reference. When implementing a feature, you can easily look up how it works across this range of sites. We've also included recommendations for best practices for each feature. While there is no single answer for every situation, we relate our observations about different approaches and make strong recommendations. Remember, there may not be one right answer, but there certainly are many wrong answers. This section helps you navigate the options.