

Internet search techniques - Google – Beyond the basics

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Introduction

Google is not new. So why an article on Google in 'What's New in Marketing'? While Google has now been with us for over five years, Google employs an army of 'techies' to improve its services. Some of the advances are incorporated into the main search engine algorithm to improving the relevance of search results. Successful search for the user is all about relevance – relevant information related to the key phrase typed in. That's why in most countries Google is now the top search engine (as Search Engine Watch shows (www.searchenginewatch.com/reports)) and that's why this article focused on Google.

This article will show you how to use Google more effectively; through going beyond simple search queries to use advanced queries to give you more relevant results. I find that many people do not use the Advanced Search facilities of Google at all, while some just use some of them. Some tweaks to your searching practice can save your hours or even days through the year depending on how much time you spend with your 'browser. The examples we will look at based on a market researcher looking for published research. We start by looking at strategies for identifying the key words you type into Google to find the information you are looking for. We then look at using the Advanced Search facility in Google and the special key phrases you can use.

1. Why use Google?

I recommend using Google, and the morning session of my CIM training workshop 'Marketing Research Using the Internet' focuses on it since:

1. Returns the best matches due to its proprietary Page Rank technology (Read more at: <http://www.google.com/technology>).
2. It has a large index (over 3 billion web pages). This is partly why Google is named Google. Click here to find out why: <http://www.google.com/corporate/history.html>.
3. It is fast.

Many worldwide agree; over 250 million searches are performed on Google every day – far more than other search engines (<http://www.searchenginewatch.com/reports/perday.html>).

2. Search engine search strategies:

Since we are all short of time, there is a tendency to dive straight in and type a couple of keywords to find what we're looking for.

But if we pause before typing we will actually find our results quicker. The more words the more relevance. So the key to using search engines is to increase your typing speed and enter more words.

In this section we outline a structured approach to selecting the best keywords to type into a search engine to find the information you want. It will seem time consuming to start with, but will soon become second nature.

Follow the example and then try it for one of your current or recent information searches.

- Step 1. Be specific
- Step 2. Identify different concepts in your search.
- Step 3. Think laterally – identify synonyms and alternative terms
- Step 4 Combine different search concepts

>> Step 1. Be specific

You will rarely get a good search match with just one or two words. We all know this, but there is a tendency to save time by typing fewer words.

So, use more words for more accurate results

For example if you're interested in a particular type of travel, rather than just entering:

travel

you would enter

air travel.

Another approach is to think how you would express your search in a single sentence if talking to a colleague or librarian.

Example:

"Where do I find data about trends in transport in Europe for different modes of transport"

This identifies these key words and key phrases:
"modes of transport", "Europe" "trends".

Tip. It helps if you think 'Key phrases' such as "modes of transport" rather than 'Keywords' such as 'transport' and 'modes' since, by default, Google looks for the best match for the word you type in a phrase rather than as separate keywords.

>> Step 2. Identify different concepts in your search.

Different concepts often include a subject object and verb. For example

Concept	Example
Subject:	Transport
Specific type of subject/scope:	Modes of transport, Europe
Application:	Assessing volume
Type of information / data needed:	Trends
Likely source / or publication type	Industry organisation or government

Tip: 'Think like the captioner': Think how the title of the page or caption on a figure or table would be labeled by its authors. I often use this approach to find data from a report – using keywords such as the current year, trends, or the geographical scope such as 'worldwide' can help find the information you need.

Also think how the search terms might be referred to in a sentence.

For example:

A page title: "Trends in transportation"

Table caption: "Projections for different modes of travel in Europe from 2002 to 2015"

Body text: "This report summarises future projections for transportation"

>> Step 3. Think laterally – identify synonyms and alternative terms

Example:	Core concept	Alternative terms
Subject:	Transport	Transportation, Travel
Specific type of subject/scope:	Modes of transport, Europe	Journey type, European
Application:	Assessing volume	Kilometers, total distance
Type of information needed:	Trends	Projections Forecasts
Likely source / or publication type	Industry organisation or government	Filter using +site:.org or +site:..gov +site:.eu.int

>> Step 4 Combine different search concepts

The next step is to review the different keywords you have generated to identify the search query:

- Which will commonly occur in a phrase, e.g. "modes of transport"
- Which are essential e.g. transport
- Which are the alternatives e.g. trends OR forecasts OR projections

A Google search query string can then be devised (but, remember you are limited to ten terms):

>> Information source strategies:

Your searching strategy will naturally depend on the type of information you are looking for. So don't only think of the type of information, also think of the type of source you are using. Examples of information sources include:

- Published research data – academic or government
- Published research report
- Market information
- Online news article
- Supplier info
- Company information – information about a particular supplier
- Customer information – finding
- Product information – finding the best product for purpose

3. Using Google Advanced Search

Using advanced search will give you better results by focusing or narrowing down your query.

The best way to understand how advanced search works is:

- First use Google's special 'Advanced search' page.
- Second learn the special Google codes or syntax that produce the advanced search results.
- Once familiar with them, you can type the codes into the Google Search box as normal without the need to use the Advanced search option.

Lets take an example: A researcher for a UK-based travel company is researching overseas markets.

They are assessing demand for different forms of travel in different European countries, and how it will vary in the future...

Continuing the previous example, let's says that the information we want must:

- Refer to travel in Europe
- Specifically refer to different modes of transport

- Refer to 'trends' 'forecasts' or 'projections'
- Exclude reference to traffic

Go to Google Advanced search (www.google.com/advanced) and then follow the stages in the four summary grids follow. Google gives these main options for advanced search:

- >> 1. All the Words
- >> 2. Exact phrase
- >> 3. With at least one of the words
- >> 4. Excluding the words

>> **1. All the Words**

	Meaning	Equivalent code	Example:
1 With All of the Words	This means that the word MUST be present on the page. Boolean AND	+, AND (this is not essential since this is the default in Google)	+travel
Try It!: Just type <i>travel</i> and <i>Europe</i> into the 'with all of the words' box of www.google.com/advanced Results: There will, of course, be millions of results			

Tip. I use the + symbol quite often when Google excludes a common word such as 'a' or 'of' (technically known as a 'stop' word) since it is a useful part of the query.

>> **2. Exact phrase**

	Meaning	Equivalent code	Example:
2. With the Exact Phrase	The exact phrase MUST be present on the page	Double quotes " "	"modes of transport"
Try It!: Now add <i>modes of transport</i> into the 'with the exact phrase' box of www.google.com/advanced Results: There are still hundreds of thousands of results. The top ones combine 'modes of transport' in the keywords and titles of the pages			

>> **3. With at least one of the words**

	Meaning	Equivalent code	Example:
3. With at least one of the words	It is not essential the word is on the page, but if it is, the resulting page will be ranked higher Boolean OR	OR (although this is useful for understanding complex queries, this is the default in Google, so 'OR' is not strictly required)	projections OR trends OR forecasts
Try It!: Now add the three words <i>projections trends</i> and <i>forecasts</i> into the 'with at least one of the words' box of www.google.com/advanced Results: There are now around 6,000 results. The top ones combine now refer to specific stages of treatment – in other words the procedure.			

>> **4. Excluding the words**

	Meaning	Equivalent code	Example:
4. Without the words	Excludes the specified word(s) Boolean NOT	-	-traffic
Try It!: Now add <i>association</i> into the 'without the words' box of			

www.google.com/advanced

Results: The number of results is now reduced to 600. All pages that referred to traffic are now excluded.

Tip: Google does not support stemming, where you add a star to a word with different endings, so you would have to use transport OR transportation rather than transport* which is supported in some search engines. However you can use * to 'fill a gap' between words, e.g. <Travel * projections * Europe>. This approach works best if there are two or three alternative phrases and you are not sure which is most appropriate.

Putting it all together

If you were to type the search query you have set up in Google advanced search, straight into the Google search box, you would type:

travel europe projections OR trends OR forecasts "modes of transport" -traffic

(this is shown in the blue bar at the top of the results).

Tip: Quotes are an excellent way of narrowing down the search in complex searches. They are also needed to include what Google terms 'Stop' words which are automatically excluded from the search but sometimes useful to define a phrase, e.g. and, of, or, the.

Next month

In the next article, we continue to look at Google Advanced search. We look at how to find particular types of documents such as Word or PDF files and how to restrict our search to a single site or a group of sites. In keeping with the theme of innovation, we also look at recent Google innovations, which are released throughout the year, but are hidden from users who don't have the time to delve beyond the home page and the results page. So we will showcase some of these innovative tools from Google Labs.

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