

# Google innovations

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<b>About the author – Dave Chaffey, BSc, PhD, MCIM</b>	
<b>E-marketing trainer and consultant</b>	Clients include 3M, Barbican, Britvic, The British Council, Computer 2000, HSBC, Intel, Siebel, NCH and Tektronix
<b>Author of 6 best-selling business books</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Internet Marketing: Strategy, Implementation and Practice</i></li> <li>• <i>E-business and E-commerce Management</i></li> <li>• <i>Total E-mail Marketing</i></li> </ul>
<b>A marketing 'guru'</b>	Recognised by the CIM as one of 50 gurus who have 'shaped the future of marketing'
<b>Visiting lecturer at leading UK business schools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of Cranfield</li> <li>• University of Leeds</li> <li>• University of Warwick</li> </ul>

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## Introduction

Google has triumphed through innovation. When it was launched in 1998 it quickly became the search tool of choice for professional researchers due to the superior relevance of its results coupled with its ease of use and large index of web sites. Since that time its popularity has grown dramatically with over 250 million searches now performed on Google every day worldwide, making it one of the best known brands in the online world. This awareness and the potential to monetize it through advertising and added value services such as its business search appliances have led to a value of \$15 billion estimated for Google in its forthcoming IPO (Independent Public Offering). According to Wired (2004) Google ads alone raised \$600 million in 2003.

Google has not achieved its success by standing still. Although its search page looks much the same as it did when it first launched, behind the scenes, it has constantly refined its search algorithm in order to stay one step ahead of its competitors in delivering relevant results. These changes to its algorithm present a big challenge to organisations who offer search engine optimization services who have to do what is known as the 'Google Dance' every few months when algorithm changes impact the position of their clients' search listings. Google employs hundreds of 'search engineers' recruited from the best maths and linguistics graduates around the world. It has also introduced a raft of new search tools which are initially showcased in its Google Labs section which most Google users do not have the opportunity to delve into.

In last months column we looked at how searchers can improve the relevance of their search results through carefully defining search key phrases. I also introduced some of the features of Google's advanced search which can be used to refine search results. In this article we continue looking at some features of Google Advanced search which have been introduced since its launch. For example, restricting your search to certain document types and certain domains are great techniques to find relevant information faster. We then look at some of the amazing new services available through Google labs and third-party add-ons. Finally, we briefly look at changes made by Googles competitors in response to its success which may provide new search opportunities for us.

## More Google Advanced search features

In the last article we introduced some of the core features available through Google's advanced search page ([www.google.com/advanced](http://www.google.com/advanced)) such as defining search key phrases and including and excluding words. All the facilities I will describe are available from the Google Advanced search phrase, but 'power searchers' will prefer to type the equivalent codes directly into the search box. In the following coverage, I give the specific codes that are used to limit the number of sites returned to help you refine your search results. These specific codes are known as **operators** – they have a special meaning to Google and instruct it to perform a particular type of search.

Advanced search also offers other facilities – some more useful than others. We will look at the most useful ones:

- Specify a file format
- Specify Occurrence of keywords on web page
- Filter results to specific domain(s) (Site:)
- Restrict results by date
- View links to a page

### >>Specify a file format

Perhaps the most useful of the additional Google Advanced Search features is the facility to specify a file format for results. The options you can select are:

- **Adobe Acrobat (.pdf)** – these are often longer technical or research reports that may not be included near the top of search listing known by search marketers as SERPS (Search Engine Results Pages) because of the number of words they contain. Restricting your search just to PDF documents is a very useful, quick method for narrowing down a search which often reveals quality information not necessarily found with a basic search.
- **Microsoft Word (.doc)** – can again find relevant reports or articles that have been posted to the web in this format
- **Microsoft Powerpoint (.ppt)** – often useful for finding research presentations, competitor pitches or summarizing complex topics you are unfamiliar with. Very useful if you have to prepare a presentation on a topic if you are not familiar with the area!

### >> Specify Occurrence of keywords on web page

Very few people seem to use this option, but it can be useful for researching a market or topic you are unfamiliar with. With this advanced search technique you restrict the results to pages which contain key words within the title of the document or the web address.

The options include:

- **In the title of the page.** For example, using the advanced search operator **intitle:European travel** will look for web sites that have these keywords in the title (text enclosed within the <TITLE> </TITLE> HTML tags of an HTML document. For example <TITLE>European Travel Information</TITLE>.
- **In the URL of the page.** For example, using the advanced search operator **allinurl: European travel** will look for websites where these keywords appear in the URL (uniform resources locator, better known as the web address). The keywords may appear in the domain name or within the filename itself, e.g. <http://www.travelinformation.com/european.html>.
- **In the text of the page.** Use this option if you want to restrict your research to the body copy text and do not want your research results to be influenced by what appears in the title or URL. Example: **allintext: European travel**.
- **In the links of a page.** These are technically known as the anchors. I have not found this to be of value.

**Tip:** Using these methods to improve search relevance is not normally necessary since Google tries to product the best match for your typed keywords anyway from a combination of the occurrence of keywords in copy on the page, in the title tag and within

the page's URL. But, they can be useful for finding 'portals' about a topic or for certain types of information such as 'News', for example **allinurl:travel portal** or **allinurl:travel news**.

#### **\* and ~ operators**

If you are not sure of the exact phrase that may be in the title you could use the little known Google wildcard operator (\*). Unlike most wildcard operators, this does not give multiple endings to a word i.e. Europe\* expands to European, Europeans, etc in Altavista. Instead, in Google, '\*' fills in the gaps between two words with alternatives, so intitle: European \* travel gives sites with titles such as European vacation travel, European budget travel, etc.

Another little known operator is the tilde (~). This gives synonyms or alternatives. So European ~travel gives alternative words for travel such as tour, tourism, etc. This feature, I think introduced in 2003 can be also be very useful in standard searches instead of the OR operator.

### **>> Filter results to specific domain(s) (Site:)**

Domain based filtering using 'Site:' is very useful for some types of research where you want to show results from a limited set of sites such as UK registered domains only such as .co.uk, .gov.uk and .ac.uk. I use this feature all the time to narrow-down searches and 'home-in' on information.

To restrict sites in the SERPS to those from a single country, add the advanced search code '**site:uk**' to your query. For other sites a similar approach is used. For example, if you are looking for government statistics, but are not sure on which government site to look add the code '**site:.gov.uk**' to your search query.

**Tip:** 'Site' can also be used to limit your search to domains or specific sites.

For example, if you know you want information from the UK government statistics site, but prefer to use Google rather than the specific search engine provided on that site, you could type, **site:www.statistics.gov.uk "transport statistics"** and this will only return information from that particular web sites.

Finally, such domain filtering can also be useful if you want to display all the pages on a site which contain a particular key phrase. For example, we could search the archives of WNIM for all articles on e-mail marketing using: '**E-mail Marketing**' **site:www.wnim.com**. If you want to see all pages on a site – useful for comparing your site to competitors, a similar approach can be used. Typing: **+a site:www.wnim.com** shows all the pages in the site containing the letter 'a' which should occur on every page. The + is necessary, since as explained in the previous article, Google ignores this common letter by default.

### **>> Restrict results by Date**

The advanced search can be used to specify pages updated in the last 3, 6 or 12 months. Although this appears very useful, unfortunately I don't find it very useful in practice for the reasons given below.

**Tip:** Unfortunately this technique does not necessarily give up-to-date articles or research since older pages or documents may have been refreshed recently even though the content stays the same. As a result I hardly ever use this approach.

### **>> View links to a page**

Viewing links into a page is useful from a search marketing viewpoint since marketers naturally want more links in to a page to generate visitors. Of course, you want these referring pages to say nice things about you, so it can also be useful for reputation management. For the researcher it is one way to find related sites.

**Try It!**

To find links into the home page of the CIM site, type: **link:www.cim.co.uk**. There are over 1000 links in, but results also include some links from the site. There is no way I know to exclude these since this keyword only works on its own – no other keywords or search codes can be used. Using **info:www.cim.co.uk** also finds a larger number of pages that include the link.

## Google extras – ‘Must use’ tools from the Google Labs

Google has many tools which can make you more productive. Here we will look at the most useful:

- Google Toolbar
- Google Glossary
- Google News
- Google Answer
- Google Sets
- Tools to assess value of web pages
- The Google calculator

Many of these tools are within the Google labs, to see the full listing, click <http://labs.google.com/glossary>

### >> Google Toolbar

The Google toolbar is a ‘must have’ add-in to Microsoft Internet Explorer which enables you to start searching using Google.com any time you have your browser open – without needing to go back to the Google site each time to type in keywords.

I am amazed how few business people use this although it’s been around for a couple of years now. One of the reasons is that some corporate IT departments restrict its usage since it needs to be installed as a plug-in. However, if you have a PC at home, it’s a breeze to install. Try it, it will transform your searching life!

The Google toolbar has many features such as recording records previous searches, a pop-up blocker and gives ready access to advanced search facilities such as searching an individual site. It also gives you an idea of the Page Rank of your site or how Google rates its relevance to searchers compared to competitor sites.

The Google deskbar gives a smaller, but similar search box within the Windows task bar (usually at the bottom of the screen).

**Tip:** This tool will save you a lot of time. If you haven’t already got it, go to <http://toolbar.google.com> and follow the instructions to download. The simple option is fine.

### >> Google Glossary

The glossary is one of several tools being developed in the Google labs. To access it, click: <http://labs.google.com/glossary>

This is great for learning about new topics or that latest piece of marketing jargon.

When you type in a keyphrase, Google works out which sites contains definitions and gives you three or four alternative definitions.

A similar, but well hidden tool is available via the standard Google search box, by entering ‘**define:**’. It is also useful for checking acronyms e.g. **define:TLA**.

It does not work as well for complex phrases; **define:e-business** and **define:marketing research** gives many matches, **define:media neutral planning** gives none.

## >> Google News

Google News has been around for about a year in the UK. You may have noticed links to news-items for some of your searches on the SERPS. There is also a separate Google News microsite which allows you to browse the latest news or search specifically from News from a wide range of sources.

Google News (<http://www.google.co.uk/newsalerts>) is a great tool for monitoring media mentions of your brand, competitors or customers since you can set up keywords for Google News to send you alerts by E-mail. It currently has limitations in that the advanced search approaches described above cannot be readily used to set up alerts and does not work for general search queries – it is restricted to Google News. The Google Alert service described in the section on Add-ins provides a much better service.

### Try It!

Try <http://news.google.com> for the US version and <http://news.google.co.uk> for the UK version

## >> Google Answers

If you're really short of time and have ready cash, you can get a more expert searcher to find information for as little as \$2 per question.

You can browse previous questions and their answers which may, in fact, answer your question.

<http://answers.google.com>

## >> Google Sets

This intriguing technology finds related terms which can be useful for identifying unknown members of a set.

<http://labs.google.com/sets>

Try typing in the name of three supermarkets and then press the button to return a larger set – related supermarkets are then displayed as if by magic. Practical applications may be limited, but this can be used to find related information or keywords about a topic. This tool could be used to find related competitors or products within a market you are unfamiliar with.

>> Tools to help assess value of pages

**Google Webquotes** gives verbal ratings of a company or its sites from commentary on other sites. This may help determine whether the items are worth clicking through to, or is again useful for reputation management.

<http://labs.google.com/cgi-bin/webquotes>

**Google Viewer** gives previews of all pages within the search engine.

<http://labs.google.com/qviewer.html>

## >> The Google calculator

This is my favourite Google tool – no more looking for that calculator – just type your calculation straight into the search box.

### Try It!

<http://www.google.com/search?&q=2%2B2>

## Google Add-on services

Google Add-ons are tools that are not created by Google, but are services created through links from other third party sites. These typically work by prompting the user for an input

via a web form and then they use the Google API (Application Programming Interface) to send instructions through to Google. Google then returns results which are displayed on the third party site.

A not very useful, but fun example of such a tool is **Google Smackdown** <http://www.onfocus.com/googlesmack/down.asp>. This compares two words and shows their popularity through the number of times these phrases occur on the web. Interesting for how a topic is reported online... In a competition between 'Internet marketing' and 'E-marketing', Internet marketing wins convincingly.

Internet marketing (1,480,000 pages)  
E-marketing (588,000 pages)

Of course, you could find this information from Google itself, but the third party site puts a wrapper around Google to make it easier.

A much more useful tool is **Google Alert**. This site enables you to setup daily personalized Google searches and e-mails you the results each day. A great method for reputation management.

#### **Try It!**

Google Alert [www.googlealert.com](http://www.googlealert.com).

A further example of an Add-on which may be of interest to the specialist researcher is The Fagan Finder (<http://www.faganfinder.com/engines/google.shtml>) this uses the Google API to create a form similar to Google Advanced Search page. Its main benefit is that it enables precise definition of dates when documents were created/updated – this is unavailable in Google.

Further details of the Google API and add-on tools are available in Google Hacks (Calishain and Dornfest, 2003)

## **Innovation from rival search engines**

Competitive search engines have not stood still while Google has introduced the innovations described in this article. For example, virtually every major search engine now has a toolbar.

There has also been a lot of acquisition activity within the search sector. Most significantly, Yahoo! has acquired Overture.com, the paid performance search engine offering text-based keyword advertising via a range of sites. In early 2004, Yahoo! announced it would end the incorporation of Google-based results in its SERPS. Instead it plans to offer its own web crawler to index web pages and its own algorithm to deliver results. Yahoo also announced its own research labs. Microsoft has also pledged to develop a search engine that rivals Google technology for relevance and will be sure to look at ways to integrate it closely with future releases of Windows.

Meanwhile, an alternative challenge may be provided by Nutch ([www.nutch.org](http://www.nutch.org)) which will be an open source, search engine meaning that different search providers can incorporate its search techniques. So, innovation in search technology is a difficult field to keep up with whether you are a marketer researching markets online or looking to improve your companies visibility on the SERPS. The speed of innovation means that many outsource their search marketing activities to a specialist search agency. If this is not an option tap into the Search Day e-newsletter ([www.searchenginewatch.com/searchday](http://www.searchenginewatch.com/searchday)) or follow the Webmasterworld search forums ([www.webmasterworld.com](http://www.webmasterworld.com)) which arguably gives the best quality discussion on search marketing techniques.

## **Further reading**

Calishain, T. and Dornfest, R. (2003) *Google Hacks 100 Industrial-Strength Tips and Tricks*. O'Reilly. This is a technical book that mainly explores the Google API. However, the

first half of the book has many nuggets about Google search techniques and tools. The Google Pocket book by the same publisher focuses more on basic research using Google.

FreePint ([www.freepint.com/bar](http://www.freepint.com/bar)) You can get help with tricky research questions here. Freepint is a community of tens of thousands of researchers and information specialists. For example, this is a question about the automotive market:

<http://web.freepint.com/forum/bar/read.php?i=24726&start=0>

SearchEngineWatch ([www.searchenginewatch.com](http://www.searchenginewatch.com)) Up-to-the minute news and reports of search engines from the search engine marketer and researcher's perspective.

Wired (2004) The Complete Guide to Googlemania. March 2004.  
<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.03/google.html>

## **Dave Chaffey – Contact details**

Dr Dave Chaffey, Director Marketing Insights Limited  
>> Improving Performance through eMarketing Intelligence >>  
E-mail: [dave.chaffey@marketing-insights.co.uk](mailto:dave.chaffey@marketing-insights.co.uk)  
Phone: +44 (0)7740 181 590  
Web: [www.marketing-insights.co.uk](http://www.marketing-insights.co.uk)  
eResources and Books: [www.marketing-online.co.uk](http://www.marketing-online.co.uk)