



## Pew & Internet American Life PROJECT

### PEW INTERNET PROJECT DATA MEMO

**FROM: Susannah Fox, Director of Research (202) 557 3462**

**RE: Search engines**

**DATE: July, 2002**

Search engines have become an indispensable utility for Internet users. More than eight in ten American Internet users have gone to search engines to find information on the Web. More than one in four U.S. Internet users – about 33 million adults – present queries on search engines on a typical day. Topics can range from the ridiculous (“How many times does my name come up on Google?”) to the sublime (“Where was Buddha born?”) to the heartbreaking (“My mom has breast cancer – I need information fast”). But the strategies are similar for all these questions – type keywords into a search engine and go from there.

In fact, the Pew Internet Project has found that search engines are the most popular way to locate a variety of types of information online – including health information, government information, and religious information.

In all, 85% of American Internet users have ever used an online search engine to find information on the Web and 29% of Internet users rely on a search engine on a typical day.<sup>1</sup> Only the act of sending or reading email outranks search-engine queries as an online activity – some 52% of Internet users check email on a typical day.

Online men are more likely than women to use a search engine on a typical day (33%, compared to 25% of women). College graduates are also more likely to use a search engine on a typical day (39%, compared to 20% of high school graduates). Internet users who have been online for three or more years are also heavy search engine users (39% on a typical day, compared to 14% of those who got access in the last six months).

According to comScore Media Metrix, Google is currently the most-used general search engine based on average minutes spent per usage month. Google garnered an average of

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<sup>1</sup> Figures based on a daily tracking survey conducted January 3-31, 2002. Sample:  $n = 2,391$  adults 18 and older. Margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points for results based on Internet users

25.9 minutes per user in May 2002, an increase from 23.4 minutes in October 2001. Yahoo's average for May 2002 was 10.8 minutes per user and MSN averaged 5.9 minutes per user.

However, MSN is king for the searching audience – 43 million unique visitors used that search engine in May 2002, possibly because the Internet Explorer browser defaults to MSN Search when a user types a keyword in the address bar. Yahoo recorded 38 million unique visitors and Google recorded 36 million unique visitors in May 2002.

To illustrate the point that search engines are the starting point to an online session for many Internet users, here are case studies from the Pew Internet Project of four kinds of information searches – tracking down people, health advice, government services, and religious information.

### **Searching for an individual: Vanity searchers and detective searchers<sup>2</sup>**

About one in four Internet users has typed their own names into a search engine to see what information about them is on the Web. Men are more likely to do a “vanity” search (30%, compared to 24% of women), as are college graduates (33%, compared to 24% of high school graduates). Young people are more likely than older Americans to have looked up their own name – 29% of 18-29 year-olds, compared to 20% of 50-64 year-olds. Most of these searchers say they found what they expected when they looked for information about themselves: 55% say that. However, 24% of vanity searchers were surprised by how much information they found about themselves online. Sixteen percent of vanity searchers were surprised by how little information they found about themselves. Seventy-six percent of vanity searchers found the information accurate, compared to 17% who found the information to be inaccurate.

About one in three Internet users has looked up someone else's name on a search engine. There were no significant differences between men and women when it comes to “detective” searches. Thirty-eight percent of college graduates have typed someone else's name into a search engine, compared to 33% of high school graduates. Young people are more likely than older Americans to have done a detective search – 43% of 18-29 year-olds, compared to 29% of 50-64 year-olds, for example.

The personal trumps the professional when it comes to detective searches – and many searchers are reaching into the past for people they seek on search engines. About two-thirds of those looking up “someone else” on a search engine say their search was for personal reasons. One-third of these searchers were googling for professional reasons. Seventy-seven percent of detective searchers were trying to find a specific piece of information, such as an address. Seventy-one percent were trying to find someone they have lost track of. Ten percent were trying to find out something about someone they

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<sup>2</sup> Figures based on a daily tracking survey conducted August 13 – September 10, 2001. Sample:  $n = 2,247$  adults 18 and older. Margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points for results based on Internet users.

were about to meet for the first time. Sixty-five percent of detective searchers find the search results useful.

### **Searching for health information<sup>3</sup>**

Seventy-three million American adults use the Internet to look for health information, up from 52 million in the fall of 2000. They research prescription drugs, explore new ways to control their weight, and prepare for doctor's appointments, among other activities. Many say the Internet has helped them or someone they know and very few report harmful effects from acting on bad information they found online.

The typical health seeker starts her hunt for medical information at a general search site, not a medical site. She visits two to five sites during an average visit. She (women are more likely than men to look for health information online) spends at least thirty minutes on a search. She feels reassured by advice that matches what she already knew about a condition and by statements that are repeated at more than one site. She is likely to turn away from sites that seem to be selling something or don't clearly identify the source of the information. And about one third of health seekers who find relevant information online bring it to their doctor for a final quality check.

Last time they searched for health advice, 81% of e-patients started at a search engine or use the search function of a general portal such as the Yahoo home page, MSN, or AOL. Fifteen percent of the health seekers started at a site that specializes in health information, like WebMD. Those who used a search query on a search engine were more focused on getting the information fast than in finding a trusted name – 45% started at the top of the search results and worked their way down; 39% read the results list and then clicked on the items that seemed to be the most relevant; and just 12% clicked on a site because they recognized the sponsor or name.

Eighty-two percent of e-patients say they find what they are looking for “most of the time” or “always” when they go online to search for health information.

### **Searching for government information<sup>4</sup>**

Fully 68 million American adults have used government agency Web sites – a sharp increase from the 40 million who had used government sites in March 2000 when we first polled on the subject.

In their most recent use of a government site, these Internet users were relatively likely to have begun their search at a major search engine or general site such as MSN or AOL (49%). About 29% started at a government agency site they had used before; 9% started

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<sup>3</sup> For more on e-patients, see “Vital Decisions: How Internet users decide what information to trust when they or their loved ones are sick.” Available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=59>

<sup>4</sup> For more on government site users, see “The Rise of the E-Citizen: How People Use Government Agencies' Web Sites.” Available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=57>

at a site they had heard about through a government publication; 7% began a site recommended by a friend or another source like a newspaper advertisement; and 3% went hunting through a portal that specializes in bringing together government material such as FirstGov.gov.

Those who used general search queries when they began their hunt for government material tended to read the search list and pick the options that seemed to fit what they were trying to do or picked a site whose name they knew. Only 21% started with the first item on their search list and then checked other sites if that first hit didn't work.

### **Searching for religious information<sup>5</sup>**

Twenty-eight million Americans, or 25% of Internet users, have used the Internet to get religious and spiritual information and connect with others on their faith journeys. This is an increase from our survey findings in late 2000, which showed that 21% of Internet users – or about 19 million people – had gone online to get religious or spiritual material.

In their most recent search, 39% of “religion surfers” said they went to a familiar place online, while the rest either went to search engines or the search function of general portals. About 4% used religious portals at the start of their search for religious information.

### **About the Pew Internet & American Life Project**

The Pew Internet & American Life Project is a nonpartisan, independent research organization funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts to study the impact of the Internet on families, communities, health care, education, civic and political life, and the work place.

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<sup>5</sup> For more on religion surfers, see “CyberFaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online.” Available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=53>