

March 30, 2005

Vertical Search – Looking Up Vertical Search Lines

By Jim Hedger, StepForth News Editor, [StepForth Placement Inc.](#)

Vertical search refers to search engines designed to return results from very narrow or specific information or business sectors. Search tools that focus on a tight regime of information have existed for years. There are plenty of examples that already exist such as the highly successful book-search engine, AbeBooks.com, or the various job and career search engines like Monster.com. Name a business sector and you can likely find a search tool designed specifically for that sector. Vertical search is not a new idea however branding it as an essential type of search engine is. To quote the respected blogger, [Om Malik](#), "You can't go two steps on Sand Hill Road, the epicenter of venture capital without some money man espousing the virtues of vertical search."

LookSmart Looking Before Leaping

Seeing the growing interest in Vertical Search, LookSmart has introduced five new vertical search engines, each of which draws from LookSmart's database. Focusing on teens, students, families and women, these vertical search features are a way for LookSmart to test the waters of this market without actually reinventing its brand. For teens and college students, [Teenja.com](#), [GradeWinner.com](#) and [24hourscholar.com](#) provide information and entertainment options targeted at three distinct youth markets. Parents can find information on child raising, nutrition and entertainment options for families at [ParentSurf](#) while the busy mother-on-the-go can find information for time-stressed moms at [GoBelle](#).

These five vertical search engines will soon be available on one page via LookSmart's web-community Furl. After the user finds information using one of the five new vertical search tools, Furl users can save content to a personal archive and easily share that information with others. Furl is also a social network with topical archives built on recommendations from its members.

"LookSmart believes that search on the Web will become increasingly vertical and personal. Consumers turn to the Web in search of essential content be it related to a hobby, work or education," said Debby Richman, senior vice president of consumer products for LookSmart in a recent press release. "The new verticals were developed to build upon LookSmart's core demographics of researchers and families from the company's existing consumer products, FindArticles and Net Nanny."

Why Vertical Search is Important

Traditionally, search engines are thought of to be general information resources from which a wide range of information can be extracted based on general keywords. As the Internet becomes more populated with both users and content, a migration from general information sources to specific information sources is natural. Trying to find a used car of any type using Google's general search engine is like trying to find a grain of sand in a glass vase. A search engine dedicated to used cars on the other hand would likely guide the user to more accurate information faster than a general search tool would.

This sort of thinking makes a lot of sense when you stop to think about it. Why should I arrange my travel plans, (a major investment of a critical two week period in an otherwise work-a-day year), using a

general, commercialized search engine when faster and more specific alternatives are emerging? It seems rather like buying an off the rack suit when a tailored one is available for a similar cost.

This might be a mistake however. While the major search engines (Google, Yahoo, MSN and Ask Jeeves) are considered by many to be “general search engines”, each of them offers some form of vertical search features.

Back in the autumn of 2003, Yahoo was bragging about [expanding](#) its Vertical Search features through the integration of Yahoo Shopping results with Yahoo search results.

Local search, a feature offered by nearly every major search engine is considered a variant on the concept of Vertical Search. By narrowing the field of results to a relatively small geographic area, local-search features offered by the major search engines make a mountain of information into a well-mapped molehill. Each of the majors offers some form of localized search, and each is expanding ways to help users narrow their search results to find information as quickly as possible.

As a measure of how seriously the major search tools are taking “vertical search”, Google currently lists seven management level [jobs](#) in its emerging Vertical Search division.

Search engine users should expect to see a wave of sector-specific search tools emerge in the coming months. A lot of money is being pumped into smaller companies and start-ups to create search engines for unique companies or business sectors. The big search engines, which already offer vertical channels under different names, will start to re-brand those various channels as Vertical Search tools.

Businesses and search engine marketers should watch emerging search tools and the established search engines to see if they or their clients can benefit from the growth of this sub-sector of search. There is nothing wrong with more consumer options and an expansion of the marketing tools offered by the Internet. Ultimately, it will be the users who determine if Vertical Search tools are viable as businesses. If they are, great interest will continue to rise. If they are not however, Newtonian rules will apply. Any object that goes up in a vertical line, will come down in a similar vertical line.