

Smaller Search Engines Find Their Niche

The way specialized search services such as Spock and Marchex see it, there are some things they can do better than Google

by [Catherine Holahan](#)

Jay Bhatti thinks that he has Google's weak spot all figured out. The search Goliath isn't very good with people.

A Google search for an individual may return tens of thousands of links in milliseconds. But it won't display a concise summary of all the information available on the Web about that person, such as her occupation, her interests and hobbies, her age, marital status, where she's from, and what she looks like.

That's where Bhatti's company, Spock, comes in. His people search engine, scheduled for launch in July, is one of the dozens of niche endeavors trying to capture some of the more than \$60 billion projected to be spent on search marketing over the next four years. Rather than compete with the likes of Google ([GOOG](#)), Yahoo! ([YHOO](#)), and Microsoft ([MSFT](#)) on the breadth and volume of information indexed, these companies hope to capture market share by providing the most comprehensive results in specific categories, known as "verticals" in search jargon. Bhatti, for example, wants Spock to become the site people visit to find details on particular people. "Searching for people in a general search engine is like trying to look for a needle in a haystack," says Bhatti. "What works in general search doesn't necessarily work in vertical search."

The targeted-search concept has been around since the 1990s but has gained new life in recent years as people have grown comfortable using search engines to find anything from a local hardware store to long-lost relatives. The way specialized search providers see it, the big search engines are great starting points for Web research. What better way to find out that there's a site devoted entirely to sushi? A million blue links doesn't suffice, however, when people want an answer to a specific question, such as who serves the best maki platter for under \$25?

IMPROVING THE SIGNAL-TO-NOISE RATIO

JupiterResearch analyst Kevin Heisler sees specialized content as a compelling way to compete with the universal search providers, whose Web crawlers have already indexed much of the Internet. "I think people realize that every broad or general search engine has its limitations," says Heisler, "and that opens up an opportunity for more sophisticated types of search."

Later this month, Marchex ([MCHX](#)) plans to launch more than 100,000 focused search sites. Many center on providing information to location-specific, multipronged queries such as: Who is the best hairstylist in my zip code who charges less than \$100 for a haircut? Most of the sites will feature user-generated reviews, maps, and menus to further narrow search criteria. "In search, everything is about noise reduction," says Matthew Berk, Marchex's lead software architect. General search engines, because of the sheer amount of information returned, aren't as capable of filtering irrelevant content, he argues.

On June 5, Expedia veteran Mark Britton launched Avvo, a search site for finding lawyers. While working as general counsel for Expedia ([EXPE](#)) as that travel search service took off, Britton decided there was a similar opportunity for a search engine focusing on attorneys. The big search engines "are able to serve up 200,000 or more pages in response to a query," says Britton. "The problem is that consumers cannot process the information in those 200,000 pages." What they need is "more laser-focused information."

NOT JUST NICHE PLAYERS

Of course, the search industry leaders also recognize that not every question requires a million answers. Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, and IAC/InterActiveCorp's ([IACI](#)) Ask.com have all started going after niche interests coveted by advertisers, such as health and local search. In February, Microsoft bought Medstory, a medical-oriented search engine; Yahoo also has a health-focused site. The interest isn't difficult to understand. WebMD ([WBMD](#)), one of the leaders in health search, generated more than \$250 million in ad sales last year. Even AOL founder Steve Case is getting into the act with a new site, [revolutionhealth.com](#).

Likewise, the big four search engines are offering location-oriented capabilities to answer specific, service-based questions and serve up related small-business ads. Ask.com augments results from its local search service, AskCity, with information and reviews from IAC's CitySearch (see [BusinessWeek.com](#), 1/29/07, "[Small Biz Ads: The Year of the Web](#)").

If the leaders keep narrowing their focus, the niche players could be in for a fight. Yet it's a fight they don't believe they would lose. After all, Google has long featured a shopping-oriented search engine, Froogle, that has never caught on as the way to browse the Web's endless aisles.

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