Search Engine Takes Personal Approach

Ask.com Hopes Detailed Results Will Boost Its 5 Percent Market Share

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Ask.com, one of the Internet's main search engines, is unveiling a new Web site today that is designed to win a larger share of the high-volume search market at a time when many users are developing loyalties to competitors Google, Yahoo and Microsoft.

Ask's new search engine, Ask3D, offers far more information on the results page than previously provided by the company or its rivals. "The Web has evolved to a merged world of content" that extends beyond text to images, video, blogs and news updates, explained Ask chief executive Jim Lanzone.

The search engine also uses an algorithm called morph that provides users with more personalized results. Users can narrow or expand their searches, and the site also uses "geosniffing," which can tailor results to the user's location.

The new site debuts as Ask is fighting to raise its profile. The company is the fourth most popular search engine in the United States, garnering 5.1 percent of searches in April, according to ComScore, a firm that tracks Web traffic. Google dominates the market, with 49.7 percent of searches, followed by Yahoo at 26.8 percent and Microsoft with 10.3 percent. Ask, a division of IAC/InterActiveCorp, holds a slender lead over Time Warner Network, which includes AOL.

Internet search engines have become booming business because they are a primary way users navigate the Web and have been able to convert this popularity into profitability by selling ads related to search results.

But search engines trying to expand their market are facing...
difficulties because users are getting used to those they already use, especially Google, and feel little incentive to change, said Greg Sterling, principal analyst with Sterling Market Intelligence.

"The power of brand, Google in particular, is very, very strong," he said.

For Ask to break out, it needs to make a visual shift that could entice visitors to try the site, he said.

"They needed to shake things up and take some chances, and I think they're doing that," Sterling said. But he added that the update might not be enough to provide Ask the momentum it's seeking.

Google is moving in a similar direction with its universal search, which combines listings from its databases of video, images, news, local information and books. But Google has not gone as far in overhauling its Web page.

Ask executives said the purpose of its new presentation is to cut down the number of clicks it takes users to find the information they are looking for and reduce the amount of page scrolling required.

The new search engine will not immediately change how Ask makes money from the site because the Web page will include the same number of ads at the top and bottom of the results pages.

Staff writer Sara Kehaulani Goo contributed to this article.