

Don Lancaster's

RESOURCE BIN

number sixty

Finding answers on the web.

Our usual reminder here that the *Resource Bin* is now a two-way column. You can get tech help, consultant referrals and off-the-wall networking on nearly any electronic, *tinaja* questing, personal publishing, money machine, or computer topic by calling me at (520) 428-4073 weekdays 8-5 Mountain Standard Time.

US callers only, please.

I'm now in the process of setting up my new *Guru's Lair* web site you will find at (where else?) www.tinaja.com This is the place you go for instant tech answers. Among the many files in our library, you will find complete reprint sets for all of the *Resource Bin* and other columns. Plus a brand new [Synergetics Consultant's Newtwork](#) & lots of links to unique web sites.

You will get the best results if you have both [Netscape Gold](#) and [Acrobat Reader 3.0](#) installed. This new reader does utterly amazing things online.

Come visit. There's now all sorts of exciting stuff to be found.

Getting Web Answers

This month, I was going to tell you about a few of my favorite web sites. But I've had so many calls and letters asking how to do web research, that I thought we'd first look into how you use the web to find useful info.

Nailing the goodies.

For instance, I just got a call from someone beginning a major university study on exactly how cellular phones interfere with hearing aides. Entering the key words of *cellular phone hearing aide interference* into *Alta Vista* quickly led to the definitive Swedish study on this subject.

Somebody else wanted to know all about formaldehyde litigation. This time *Deja News* gave us hundreds of useful results. A few of which end up hilarious. If you didn't happen to be the one in the barrel.

Or, in this case, the jar.

Firstoff, note that the really superb stuff may not yet be net available. For somebody somehow has to pay for all top quality research.

Your "best" info traditionally came from premium data bases. Each field has its name brand biggie or two. The doctors use *Medline*. Lawers use *Lexus* or *Nexus*. Engineers often will start off by using *INSPEC*. Then may step over to *MathSci* or *Compendex*.

Librarians prefer *Bowker*, *Oxbridge*, or *Gale*. Accessing *Ulrich's Periodicals Dictionary*, *Books in Print*, that *Science Citations Index*, or else the *Encyclopedia of Associations*.

These premium data bases typically had to get accessed through fee based online services. Such as *Dialog*. That do charge as much as two dollars per minute. But often end up by far your fastest and cheapest way to get crucial information in a big hurry.

A fine pair of offline traditional info sources are *UMI* and *The Information Store*. These are your places to go for hard copy reprints of nearly anything. But you'll have to know the *exact* title, author, journal, and page.

Thanks to Adobe's new *Acrobat 3.0*,

NEXT MONTH: Don tells us all about his favorite world wide web sites.

instant reprints that are faster, better, and cheaper are quickly being offered online. By the thousands. From many hundreds of sites. Freebie Acrobat 3.0 readers at www.adobe.com

More webmasters are discovering that they can get zillions of hits by up front paying for and then distributing premium research. Material that is not available elsewhere on the net. As an example, free *Medline* access can now be found on a dozen web sites.

Even if they seem weaker, new and

free services sometimes may cut into the traditional territory of all the one time big players. For instance, *Books in Print* is not yet on the net. At least I have yet to find it. But [Amazon Books](#) has a free book search service which sometimes is "almost as good".

Let's look at a few key tools needed to get web answers...

A Master Resource

There are several hundred sites that specialize in providing search engines and related web access tools. One of the best *meta* sites that I have found is [lookup.com](#). Who have gathered up 74 of the best search engines all together in one place at one time.

Iffen the right one don't git ya, the left one will.

I have got a link for this site on my *Guru's Lair* at www.tinaja.com Links to other mentioned sites also show up here. Additional answer getting tools will often be found on the *Guru's Lair webmastering* library shelf.

The Yahoo Dice

The highest profile search engine is *Yahoo*. But I don't care for them. First because it is way too painful to enter your own site into their registry. And second, because I'll usually get faster and better results elsewhere.

But one handy feature of Yahoo is their *dice icon*. Which will warp you somewhere in cyberspace. Totally at random. I like to hit their dice at least thirty times a day. First, to get a full and accurate picture of what the net is all about. Second, to pin down sites I wouldn't have otherwise found.

The dice also get you started on the *avalanche effect*. For most any site will provide a *hot links* button. One which leads you in to dozens or hundreds of new sites of potential use to you. And those sites direct you to yet thousands more. By linking the links, you should be able to waltz around cyberspace

with a vengeance. Theoretically, any site is less than a dozen mouse clicks away from a random selection.

Incidentally, these Yahoo dice also tell you a lot about the "severity" of all the porn on the net. I have found that something around one die hit in 175 yields content someone might find offensive. Around one hit in 1374 is a real porno site. And fewer than one hit in 19,763 is a primo porno site.

At least that's the number of times so far that I have hit the dice without being able to find one. Let me know if you have any better luck.

A faster accessing mirror for these Yahoo dice is on www.tinaja.com

Whenever it comes to serious web searching, instead of picking Yahoo I very much prefer...

Alta Vista

You'll find a dozen or more major Internet general search engines. With names like *Yahoo*, *Alta Vista*, *Matilda*, *Webcrawler*, *Magellan*, *Disinformation*, *Lycos*, *Excite*, or *Inktoomi*.

Many of these go to the trouble of having an entire warehouse full of linked PC's. That maintain a *complete* model of some 100 million web pages. These models create a back index of which words appear where.

When combined with *relevance* stats of how often your word appears how close to your other selected words, a quite fast and ultra powerful search ability usually results.

To use any search engine, you enter one or more keywords. These days, a keyword can be any word or number that appears in the document, not just a selection from a restricted list. The engine chomps on through everything it knows about the net and finds those pages with the highest number of hits on the most keywords.

You do have to carefully choose the keywords. Select too loose, and you'll find thousands of false hits. Too tight, and you will get nothing. Sometimes you have to find one useful hit to spot those real words that the authors will use for your target subject.

I guess I like *Alta Vista* the best. At least it is usually my starting point on typical searches. Deeply buried in my www.tinaja.com web site is a story on the *Mount Graham Aerial Tramway*, an utterly amazing engineering feat from the 1920's. I'll use this tram query string to find out how good an Internet search engine really is.

Alta Vista nails it in five seconds flat. As numero uno on their hit list.

Whois and WhoWhere

How do you find out if a company has a web site? Or if an author has an email address? Several specialized net services ease these tasks.

Two examples are located at *Whois* and *WhoWhere*.

Whois is a service from the Internet registration service you should find at www.internic.org You can use *Whois* to find out whether a domain name is in use. Or to find the name and address of an existing domain name. Or to pin down the location of a company.

WhoWhere at www.whowhere.com is more people oriented. You enter their name in any order. And back comes a list of exact matches, near misses, and at least one or more "pretty nigh but not plumb" wild guesses.

Needless to say, if you are active on the net and want to be reached, it is essential that you go out of your way to make sure you get listed.

You'll also find an *Internet Address Finder* at www.iaf.net Plus the *Domain Name Search* at alfredo.wustl.edu/htbin/domain_search? But at least on all my tests, these two sites could not find a pig in a dishpan.

Newsgroups

A *newsgroup* is simply a collection of people who publically email each other via the Usenet. Newsgroups are places where you can post questions and get answers.

Typically, a newsgroup will have a single tightly targeted interest. Such as the owners of 1987 tan Volkswagen 4WD non-Westly Synchro Vanagons having double diff locks. But no Saint Bernards. You will find many tens of thousands of newsgroups.

Most newsgroups are *moderated*. A moderator is a person in charge who filters all the raw input into coherent text. Some moderators edit heavily; anything goes with others.

A moderator will often maintain a FAQ, or *Frequently Asked Questions* file or library. This allows somebody new to the group to pick up the basics and not have to ask a lot of very tedious and repetitive questions.

As you might guess, the quality of newsgroups varies all over the lot. A few promptly offer current and expert opinion. Sadly, others are plagued by totally irrational and juvenile flaming egomaniac newbies. Who flat out do not have the faintest clue. And, in the process of proving so, drive those real experts away.

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UMI
300 N Zeeb Rd
Ann Arbor MI 48106
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Always remember that *NET* stands for *Not Entirely True*. Do *not* ever use newsgroup info as your sole source! Anybody posting to a newsgroup has an axe to grind. And a hidden agenda that almost always is not in your best interests. There is no peer review, nor any competence filtering.

Always be sure to independently check all newsgroup content! Newsgroups are intended to give you *possible* or even *probable* answers.

But *never* act on them without an independent check. Especially if the content is medical, financial, or legal in nature. Always verify.

Most newsgroups are free and open to anybody. Others require passwords and might involve charges. Typically, you email a usegroup using the word *subscribe* in the message. Or *subscribe digest* to get the summary transcript, rather than zillions of shorter ones. To get off a group, you'll typically put the word *unsubscribe* in your email. The main site header message often gives you specific details.

Let's look at three examples. Shawn Carlson's *Society of Amateur Scientists* has both a web site at www.sas.org and a newsgroup. To subscribe, email the word *subscribe* to postmaster@sas.org. To unsubscribe, email the single word *unsubscribe*. This is one example of an *automated list robot*. To ask a question or provide an answer, you email your contribution to talk@sas.org

Steve Roberts is big on nomadics. His web site is www.microship.com You subscribe to his newsletter by sending email to wordy@qualcomm.com This is one instance of an unautomated, or a *personally handled request*.

Links to both of these sites can be

found on www.tinaja.com

And to access the Vanagan Synchro stuff, you'll email a *subscribe vanogon firstname lastname* message directly to LISTSERV@lenti.med.umn.edu

Deja News and Friends

Exactly how do you find out which newsgroups are for you? Two useful resources are *Deja News* and *PAML*. The latter is an acronym that is short for *Public Accessible Mailing Lists*.

Which is a directory of some 12,000 newsgroups. Arranged alphabetically and by subject.

Once selected, specific details show up on who hosts the newsletters and how to subscribe. There's only a few hundred subjects, instead of a good in-depth search engine. For instance, you can quickly find *automotive*. But not search on *Synchro*.

Instead, your general power search tool is *Deja News*. You simply enter a search string, and *Deja News* returns every newsgroup message where all of your words appear. Either as a quick search on current contents. Or for an in-depth scan of older content.

Let's look at another example. I got this call the other day from a person who was looking for a schematic on an older PowerMate power supply. A call to PowerMate revealed that they flushed all their old docs.

Uh, this one is a rather specialized request. PowerMate products weren't all that popular. You could probably trace out the supply in a few minutes or fix it with a scope.

If you get on *Deja News* and look for *PowerMate*, you should get several hundred *false hits* on NEC computers, on strange vacuum cleaners, and even

on Coleman generators. Oops.

All of my usual ploys of tightening the search or patiently mining their dregs for a gem or two did not seem to work this time.

So, you can use the *indirect method* instead. Get on *Deja News* and search for *Power Supply Schematic Wanted*.

Not surprisingly, nobody seems to have already asked about PowerMate products. You will get around fifteen current hits and maybe a hundred or so on the backlist.

Of these, your most promising candidate sites are *sci.electronics.basics*, *sci.electronics.repair*, *sci.electronics.misc*, *sci.electronics.design*, and possibly over at *misc.industry.electronics*.

Your next step is to check out these groups for activity and relevance. You then post your question to the best of them. Chances are you should score an answer in a day or two. Provided, of course, that you post a concise and answerable question.

You do have to be careful what you enter as keywords. Too tight and you get no hits. Enter too loose and you'll get overwhelmed. You are also sure to find a lot of false hits. I was recently searching on *vacuum forming* and kept getting all sorts of returns on *fruitcake*. Which, I guess, is something that I've always suspected.

Putting my own name through *Deja News* also led to bunches of false hits. Apparently because the word "don't" is treated the same as "don".

One way to beat this is to put your full query in quotes. This slows you down but gives you far fewer false hits. Unfortunately, *Deja News* times out on me when I try this. But *Alta Vista* does not.

Note also that "*" is often supported for your use as an "any characters" wildcard. Try it.

Some search services also let you use "+" in place of "and". Or "-" in place of "or". Always check the rules to be sure.

Deja News also has a handy feature which can tell you exactly *where else* any particular individual happens to be posting messages. This can be real useful to evaluate the credibility of your new source. And to lead you on to other interesting sites.

The Deja News web site is up at xp9.dejanews/dnquery.xp

PAML is found at www.NeoSoft.com/internet/paml/index-index.html

There's newsletters for everyone.

This Month's Contests

Let's have us a pair of contests this month. Tell me about a web searching

or web access or web answer finding resource that I don't yet know about. Especially how to scam free access to *Ulrich's*, *Books in Print*, the full current telephone directory, *INSPEC*, *MathSci*, *Nexus*, or *Compendex*.

Or else finish this sentence for me: "You are spending too much time on the net if..." For instance: "You are spending too much time on the net if the *Yahoo* dice keep repeating."

Or "You are spending too much time on the net if AOL asks for their disks back." Or, if at a party you say "This is *spouse@home.com*."

There will be a largish pile of my new [Incredible Secret Money Machine](#) books going to the dozen or so better entries, plus an all-expense-paid (FOB Thatcher, AZ) [tinaja quest](#) for two that will go to the very best of all.

Send all your *written* entries to me here at [Synergetics](#), rather than to *Nuts*

& *Volts* editorial.

Let's hear from you. ♦

Microcomputer pioneer and guru Don Lancaster is the author of 33 books and countless tech articles. Don maintains his no-charge US tech helpline found at (520) 428-4073, besides offering all of his own books, reprints, and consulting services. Don also has two free catalogs full of his resource secrets waiting for you. Your best calling times are 8-5 on weekdays, Mountain Standard Time.

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