Search Engine Alternatives:  
*Will you suffer the DTs if you quit Google?*

**Delirium tremens**: (colloquially, the DTs) is a condition associated with complete and sudden withdrawal by an individual who has a history of long-term dependence on a certain behavior addiction, such as with alcohol consumption, heroin or steroids use, or the like.

Ever wonder if you’re addicted to Google? Do you need your daily or hourly fix? Does your second choice of search engine come to mind instantly? What about a third and fourth?

**Finding the methadone of search engines**

First let’s not forget the real™ search engines. Those search engines that run the big guys, *Dialog, LexisNexis, your OPAC*, etc. These are the heavy lifters of the search world and actually do proper, targeted, Boolean logic and retrieve accurate results sets that are not optimized to disguise inaccurate results in the interests of speed of retrieval. I am always amazed at the number of articles that quote search retrieval numbers as some form of ‘data’ when these numbers do vary by time of day, search traffic, server, locality, etc. When you’re seeking comprehensive and quality results you just can’t beat the good, proprietary engines.

The web engines are great for meat cleaver searchers where the top-of-mind, top-of-the-list results are sufficient. The popularity and other mathematically or socially-based algorithms are great to bring the good answers to the forefront. Information professionals know that the good or the most popular answer is not always the best. Best counts more in research that has an impact. Will the patient be cured or made healthier? Where should I invest my money without following the masses? What strategy should I bet my company on? Whatever-competitive advantage comes from finding that golden needle in the haystack, not finding the same stuff as the rest of the mob.

So, let’s make sure we keep aware of the full range of search tools we need to have in our toolkit. Here’s a tip. Take this list below and write one of each URL in the sidebar into your calendar every Monday morning. Change your homepage from Google (or your intranet, etc.) to each one for one week each. I thin that you really can’t get to know or be comfortable with a search engine until you play with it for a week. Remember that you’re just learning and that some of these search engines are betas.

There are the Big Four which you should reacquaint yourself with in case you’ve forgotten them of maybe they’ve changed a lot since you last looked. The big
four are Yahoo!, MSN Search, and AOL. They comprise, with Google, the only remaining ‘big harvests’ of the web. Many other search engines rely on their harvests for delivering the user search experience. Oh yeah, and also remember that Yahoo! and some other search sites (like MySpace) get significantly more page views than Google. Why is that? Visit and learn.

So, here’s a short list of alternative search tools to add to your information pro’s kit bag.

In the traditional vein, the sites like Ask.com, Teoma, HotBot, and AllTheWeb, are still worth playing with and seeing what innovations they’re doing in the general search space. I’d probably not get too into Lycos, AltaVista, LookSmart, Netscape Search, etc. which are just vestiges of their former selves but you never know who’s gong to rise form the dead in this space. They still often have good technology that now has a different business model than public web search. You can visit and see what you think but these guys are part of web search history. Most of them now rely on the web harvest from one of the big four.

However, the above list is pretty traditional and oriented to the general search space and to retrieval results that are usually displayed as simple lists and look pretty similar to each other. They’re useful in playing the Guess My Business Model game. Am I really about the search experience, server sales, proofs of concept, ads, social networking, or what?

The Fun Space to Search and Play

My personal alternative favorite right now is Exalead. I love the organization it uses ad the information density of its display to provide some context for my search results and alternative ways to view them. I also like the thumbnail previews. It takes a little getting used to, but it’s worth the effort.

If you’re not into visual displays, play with Mooter. It uses visualization of you results as a middle step. I think it helps improve the quality of the question and the search by providing more contexts. The multiple clusters remind us about similar words that have multiple meanings. (Hint: Try searching mercury, or Ford)

Clusty is a search engine that is powered by Vivisimo. I like the left hand sidebar that displays a taxonomic navigation option. Again, it helps to improve the quality of my searching rather than just having some math PhD decide what is relevant through an algorithm. It puts more personal choice back into my fingertips.

If you’ve avoided playing with visualization tool Grokker because it involves a download, you can experience it more easily now. Just go to their homepage and you can search Yahoo! using Grokker through a web-based client.
Lastly, and one of my favorite playthings, try KartOO. This search tool is developing quite rapidly. Pay particular attention to the language choices, visual maps, taxonomy display and the next map button. I have found that kids get this display mode quite quickly, before they’ve been taught to prefer plain lists.

So there’s a few to help you break your addiction to Google. You can find dozens more on the lists maintained at SearchEngineWatch so don’t feel that you just need to limit yourself to my list. There are plenty more!

And we won’t even start discussing your addiction to e-mail. We’ll leave that for your next therapy session. (grin) I’m looking forward to seeing many of you next month in Baltimore. The doctor will be in.

Stephen Abram, MLS is Vice President, Innovation, for SirsiDynix. He is an SLA Fellow and the past president of the Ontario Library Association and the immediate past president of the Canadian Library Association. In June 2003 he was awarded SLA’s John Cotton Dana Award. This column contains Stephen’s personal perspectives and does not necessarily represent the opinions or positions of SirsiDynix. Stephen would love to hear from you at stephen.abram@sirsidynix.com.

Sidebar:

**Search Engine Alternatives**

SearchEngineWatch Search Engine Lists
http://searchenginewatch.com/links/

Yahoo!
http://www.yahoo.com

MSN Search
http://search.msn.com

AOL
http://search.aol.com

MySpace
http://www.myspace.com

Ask.com (formerly Ask Jeeves)
http://www.ask.com
Teoma  
http://www.teoma.com

Lycos  
http://www.lycos.com

AltaVista  
http://www.altavista.com

LookSmart  
http://www.looksmart.com

Netscape Search  
http://search.netscape.com

HotBot  
http://www.hotbot.com

AllTheWeb  
http://www.alltheweb.com

Mooter  
http://www.mooter.com

Exalead  
http://www.exalead.com

Clusty  
http://www.clusty.com

Grokker  
http://www.grokker.com

KartOO  
http://www.kartoo.com