

In Search of . . . Better Ways to Search

Google, Microsoft, Ask.Com Quietly Use Spinoff Sites To Test New Features, Solicit Feedback; Pulling Up Videos By JESSICA E. VASCELLARO

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Kevin McCarty, long a devout Google user, recently discovered a search engine he often finds more helpful. It's called SearchMash, and unlike Google and other major search sites, it pulls up video, images and text all at the same time.

It turns out, though, that SearchMash *is* Google. In recent months, the top search engine and its main rivals have stealthily set up a new generation of search engines where they try out new tools and features on consumers -- without putting their tried-and-true formulas at risk. If something proves to be a hit -- the combined search results that Mr. McCarty likes so much, for instance -- it could eventually be folded into the parent site.

Google Inc. launched SearchMash.com in September without the Google name, although it is mentioned in the site's privacy policy. SearchMash displays a subset of the normal Google search results in an entirely different interface with collapsible menus for video, blog and image results on the same screen. In December, **IAC/InterActiveCorp.**'s [Ask.com](#)² launched [Ask X](#)³, which chops up the results page into an unconventional three-panel format. Standard search results are flanked on the left by suggested terms to help you narrow or expand your search and, on the right, by results broken down by categories such as news and dictionary results.

Yahoo Inc. now uses [AlltheWeb.com](#)⁴ and [AltaVista.com](#)⁵, both of which it acquired in recent years, to experiment with processes like livesearch, a feature that will start suggesting search terms for you when you type just one letter. **Microsoft** Corp.'s Windows Live unit recently launched [MsDewey.com](#)⁶, a search engine where users pose their query to prerecorded video clips of an actress playing the role of Ms. Dewey, a brassy and attractive woman in a low-cut black dress.

All of the leading search brands have operated their own internal test sites and labs for years. They frequently test layout and formatting tweaks on their main sites, often without users knowing. But now they are making their bold new ideas more public and asking users for feedback. Ask X links to a feedback form where users can submit random thoughts about the quality of the results. SearchMash devotes space on its results page to a box that asks users to select whether the results in categories like Web, image, blog and video search were useful.

The companies are starting to show their cards as Internet users demand more than just the basics from Internet search services. After all, the standard search model hasn't changed much in almost a decade. "For 90% of Internet users, search today is exactly like it was in 1998," says Ken Cassar, chief analyst for Nielsen/NetRatings. **EDITOR'S NOTE:** With paid search spending forecast to climb to \$7.6 billion in 2007, according to Jupiter Research, NETWORK's keyword search optimizer portends to be a significant player in the internet advertising market with its Natural Language Navigation patent and its newly applied-for zip-code advertising patent. Network's patents provide its advertisers exclusive, live website resolutions alongside all the major search engines and e-commerce search queries.