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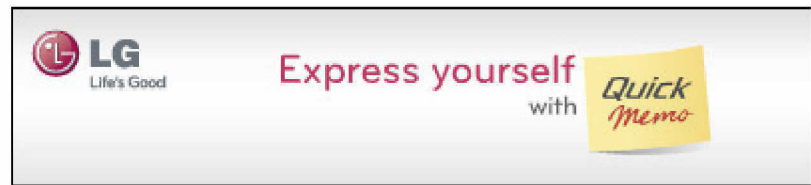
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# Direct Hit Tools Help Surfers Search Smarter

**HotBot, ICQ.com sift unrelated links using Related Search Terms function.**

By [Glenn McDonald](#), [PCWorld](#) Jan 27, 1999 12:00 am

When Direct Hit unveiled its Popularity Engine search technology last year, we were impressed with its novel approach to that sticky old problem--Finding What You Want on the Internet.

The Popularity Engine uses a continually updated database to return search results based on past users' preferences for similar search requests. Direct Hit amasses this data through a number of sources, tracking users' behavior with major search services, according to Gary Culliss, Direct Hit co-founder and chair.

"We keep track of how often search topics are entered, and take a count of the URLs people choose most often from the results list," Culliss says.

The result is a system that can produce the ten most requested URLs for a search topic, based on what past users found most useful. Since its debut last year, Direct Hit's system has been licensed by search engine HotBot; ICQ.com, a division of America Online; online directory LookSmart; and Apple's search tool Sherlock.

## Related Search Terms

This week, Direct Hit released a complementary system called Related Search Terms. It suggests additional search topics based on similar queries from other searchers.

In conjunction, the two systems provide surprisingly accurate returns. I test-drove the system on both HotBot and ICQ.com, and was found that Direct Hit generates better "directions" than either keyword-based searching or directory services. With the addition of Related Search Terms, the process becomes even more useful.

For example, I searched for sites about the band R.E.M. using HotBot. The basic HotBot engine returned a list of links that included a roster of New Jersey beauty salons (?!?). By clicking on the Direct Hit option (which HotBot presents as a separate link), I got much better results--fan Web pages, MP3 download sites, and links to various online features on the band.

What's more, the Related Links option provided a series of more specific search terms, such as R.E.M. Lyrics, R.E.M. Tablature, and R.E.M. Discography.

### Revisiting Searches

Culliss says Direct Hit's technology provides a fundamentally different approach to searching. Traditional engines look for keywords in the metatext of a Web site. Web directories such as Yahoo rely on editors to select relevant sites. Direct Hit, Culliss says, tracks what actual users have found useful across the Web.

"As new users come online, they don't know how to craft the kind of searches the veteran users do," Culliss says. "Plus, there's just a lot more stuff out there than there used to be. Yahoo indexes about a half-million sites--that's about one percent of the Web."

The addition of the Related Search Terms function adds specificity, Culliss says.

"We view our related searches as the computer talking to you: 'OK, you said wine--is that white wine? California wine?'"

Popularity Engine and Related Search Terms may pop up elsewhere.

Culliss says Direct Hit is talking with other search engines and portal sites, and that deals with current partners are nonexclusive.

"Lately, there's a renewed interest in the search features" by portal companies, he notes.

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