

**SEARCH ENGINES** THEY MAY ALL SCAN BILLIONS OF PAGES BUT WHICH OF THE BIG FIVE WILL TURN UP THE RESULTS YOU NEED?

# Did you mean: *relevant*

**T**hink about it: you probably spend more waking hours with your computer each day than you do with friends or partners. And whether you are buying stuff, looking up something, following the news or just browsing, the chances are you are navigating your way through the vast World Wide Web via a search engine.

Web surfers are conducting 39 per cent more online searches than a year ago, Nielsen/NetRatings recently revealed, with four out of every ten searches done on Google. But are Brits paying enough attention to their choice of search engine? Does the constant focus on Google match up to its abilities and how does it rank with the others?

## Google.co.uk ★★★★★

**Overview:** Google is an institution and a verb in itself – the term ‘to Google’ someone or something makes it one of the most recognised Internet brands to date. The clean, uncluttered homepage is characteristic of the brand and the relevance of the results it produces (see box) is why so many people return to Google every day.

**Tools:** The links to search news, images and Froogle (its shopping site) are functional but lack the innovation of other search engines.

**What we love:** The way the logo is adapted to reflect events and seasons – simple but clever.



Yahoo: Gives you video content

## Ask.com ★★★★★

**Overview:** With the butler now in retirement, AskJeeves recently rebranded to Ask.com and looks set to shake-up its nearest competitors. The new site is clean and simple, without seeming unfamiliar.

**Tools:** A host of useful tools really speed up life, such as a toolbox for basic searches including ‘weather’ and ‘dictionary’, while related suggestions let you pinpoint exactly what you are looking for.

**What we love:** The mini binoculars icon next to most of the search results – hover your mouse over this and it gives you a preview of the site, saving you valuable click time.

## Yahoo.co.uk ★★★★★

**Overview:** Yahoo! is still the second most popular search engine – it was one of the first to offer free e-mail. What strikes you, though, is the sheer mass of content on the homepage, with news, weather and shortcuts mixed up with advertising.

**Tools:** The shortcut button at the top of the homepage makes it easy to navigate through the e-mail, finance and messenger sections.

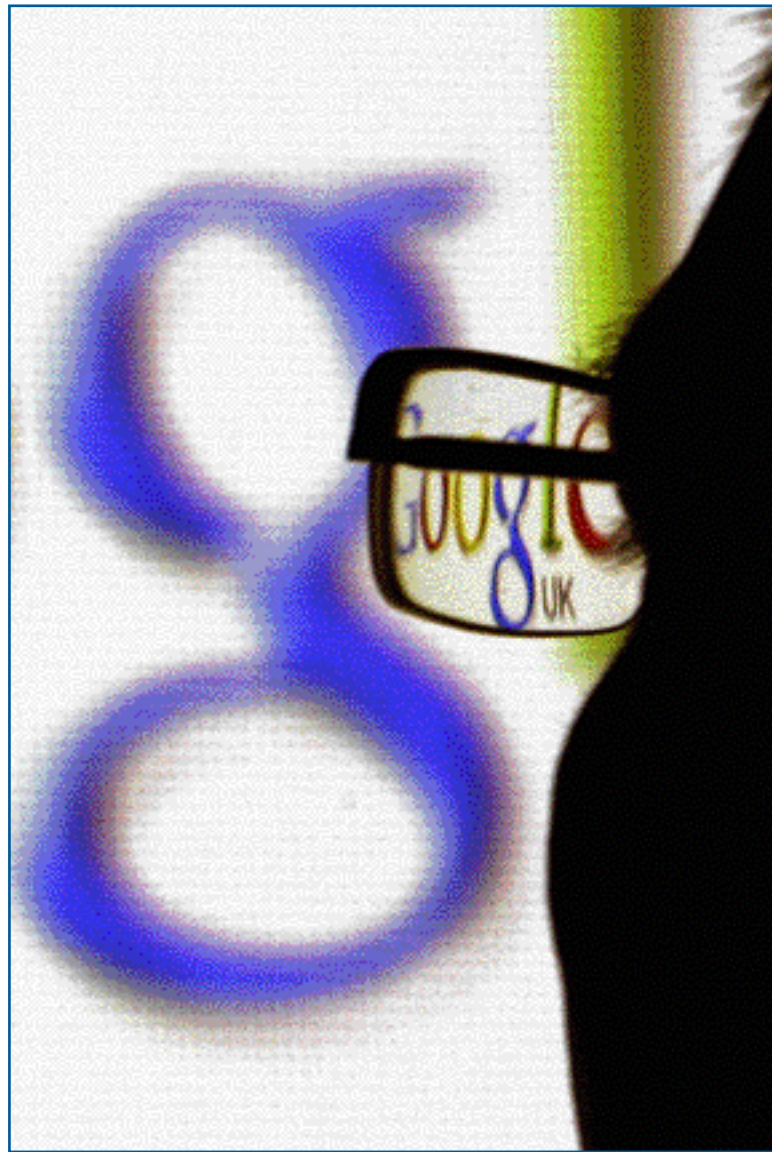
**What we love:** Some search terms also offer video content with the results. For instance, type in ‘Robbie Williams’ and Yahoo! offers the music video for Tripping.

## MSN.co.uk ★★★★★

**Overview:** Due to the success of Hotmail and MSN Messenger, MSN search has been around for some time. Like Yahoo!, MSN has a busy homepage with lots of content, news and video shortcuts.

**Tools:** MSN search offers the usual image, news and Web searches for each term you enter, a shortcut to MSN shopping and a currency converter on the homepage.

**What we love:** MSN Encarta has a range of additional tools such as the Study Centre, which offers helpful homework and reference advice.



Picture: Getty Images

Your eyes and ears on the Net: But each site works quite differently

## AOL.co.uk ★★★★★

**Overview:** Another veteran, AOL has been revamped to look slicker and cleaner. It now offers mobile music downloads courtesy of Jamster. AOL cheats a little in search functionality, as this is powered by Google. In a polished ad campaign, it is also promoting

the idea of an online community, encouraging users to discuss various hot topics.

**Tools:** No surprises – e-mail and instant messenger.

**What we love:** AOL Pictures allows you to upload and share your favourite pictures online, as well as edit and order prints.

## THE NUTS AND BOLTS

So how do they work?



All you do is type a few keywords into a box, hit return and wait – but how are the results you get determined?

**Editorial search:** A site such as Ask supports its automated trawling of the Web with human editorial input, ensuring that the results are likely to be linked to what you’re searching for.

**Automated search:** Google uses its proprietary Pagerank system to rank websites using its own algorithm and a ‘link popularity’ measure to return accurate results, all automatically.

**Social search:** This is on the rise, with Yahoo! buying popular photo-sharing site Flickr and social-bookmarking site Delicious. These work by getting users to tag content with relevant key words, making sure that returned searches were useful to other people looking for the same key words.

**Semantic search:** This is very much under development but aims to make computers understand the content of webpages to return far more accurate and useful results. To do this, Web content needs to be made more comprehensible to machines using Web standards such as XML.