

March 29, 2005.

WWW wars: directories vs. search engines

On the [iHelpYou forum](#) Dave Hawley said:

I'm starting to think that **generic directories do not serve any purpose to the average Joe**. While I have submitted and been included in many directories, I notice the traffic from them is constantly getting less, while SE traffic is ever increasing. It seems to me that directories have passed their *use by date* as SE are now so good at returning relevant results. I simply cannot think of any **real reason why a user would even use them??**

My thoughts are that these generic directories (most) **only** exist to serve Webmasters and SEOs. Certain new PFI directories have spent **BIG \$\$** obtaining PageRank and are now nothing more than PR sellers. I would bet that Google will take action on this some time soon to protect its highly valued PageRank.

What are other thoughts on this?

On this forum there has been a lot of discussion about the merits or lack thereof of directories mostly based on how they are being used or abused but I have not seen any discussions about the intrinsic value of directories as compared to search engines. Now that you have started this thread I think I'm no longer the lone voice in the wilderness. It seems there are two of us now!

To start we need to classify directories into two groups: single-subject and encyclopedic (generic if you prefer a weekday word). I'm all for single-subject directories and all against encyclopedic directories.

Let's look at some of the differences:

Size:

A single-subject directory is small enough for one editor to handle and this editor usually has a good reason for keeping his directory up-to-date. I have several mini-directories that form part of a larger web site. An encyclopedic directory needs an army of editors and this poses a real problem. Either you pay for this army or you recruit volunteers. Most directories just don't have the income to hire a sufficient number of editors to handle all the applications they receive. One alternative is to charge a fee per application and this already excludes a large majority of the knowledge base out on the web. Volunteer editors present a problem of their own, they only have a certain amount of time to dedicate to the directory and this causes huge delays in the listing of applications. There has been enough discussion about editor bias and I have no interest in going into that subject. For this discussion I'm assuming that all volunteer editors are fair in their judgments.

The size issue alone tells me that encyclopedic directories are no longer viable on a WWW that is as large and dynamic as the one that exists. Size is not much of a problem for robots that can work 24/7/365 and can multiply like rabbits. Search engines beat encyclopedic directories hands down when it comes to collecting and sorting data.

On the other hand, a single-subject directory, if properly compiled, can be much more relevant than search engine results page. The relevance issue is one that encyclopedic directory owners claim for themselves but when a directory is truly encyclopedic the difficulty of editing all the relevant listings makes the point moot. In today's world a directory that is six months behind in editing listings cannot claim to be relevant and up-to-date.

Human interface:

A single-subject directory is small enough that it can have a very shallow structure: one or two layers deep. This is the recommended interface to make

sure humans "don't get lost in hyperspace." On any one layer the user can use the browser's find feature to assist him or, if the page is not too long, he can merely browse the whole page. In a word, a single-subject directory is small enough to be "manageable" by the user.

An encyclopedic directory tends to have many layers and the user has to drill down through the various categories. This presents the user with the "fork in the road" dilemma. Should he take the wrong turn at any point, he'll never find what he's looking for or he will waste an awful lot of time backtracking through the directory. To solve this issue, many directories have their own search features. This means that the directory structure is not for the benefit of the user but for the benefit of the applicant.

A search engine is also a "search feature" but on a world wide scale. The main difference with a directory proper is that the a priori directory structure does not exist. The other differences are that you don't have to go through an editor to be allowed to appear on the WWW and you don't have to look for a directory classification before you are allowed to appear on the WWW.

I find it illustrative to analyze the reasons for getting listed in a directory. Irony of ironies, the one most often heard is so that search engines can find your site. If directories are so good, why bother with search engines at all? Hmm...

A search engine's job is to search the WWW, find sites and pages, and then rank them by keyword and key phrase. One single link to a site is enough for search engines worth their salt to find that site.

Where to place that link?

- Any professionally designed site can be listed in the designer's portfolio
- Any site professionally optimized by a SEO expert can be listed in the expert's portfolio
- It is enough to find one website with similar content to exchange links with to get the ball rolling
- It is enough to find one blog willing to talk about the site and place a link to it [/list]Of course, you can also submit directly to the search engine so you

don't even need a starting link.

When you are told that getting listed in many directories is the way to get into search engines what you are being told is that search engines are all cripples that need the help of directories to do their job. At best, this information is several years out of date. I have sites that have never been listed in any directory that appear with good page rank in the serps.

Denny Schlesinger