

Is It Really A9 Out of 10?

By [Ross Dunn](#), CEO, [StepForth Search Engine Placement Inc.](#)

Personalization, the search engine buzzword of the year! Every major search engine with public goals has noted that some form of personalization will be implemented into future versions of their engines. What is personalization? It is a buzzword so there are many visions of this definition; however, in my opinion a large part of personalization is factoring a user's previous searches to ultimately tailor its results to create a better search experience. There are, of course, many glitzy addons like the ability to customize the look and feel of a search engine but those are far from news worthy. In today's news, however, Amazon.com has just launched a new search engine called [A9](#) which provides a more personalized search experience. Let's see just how personalized this service is.

A9 REQUIREMENTS

For basic use the search engine does not have any requirements; however, many of the personalization features do require that the A9 Toolbar be installed. The toolbar offers many of the tools that toolbar aficionados are use to seeing: search bar, keyword highlighting, site search, and popup blocking. The toolbar also offers Alexa web site popularity data attributed to the visiting site by clicking on the 'Site Info' button. Alexa ratings are of some interest but the only data that I find useful is the "People who visited this site also visit" web site list. That said I don't think I would ever use this tool, however, it does offer some interesting options for relational web searching when a user is conducting targeted data mining (if you find a site that doesn't quite meet your needs, use this tool to find similar sites and hunt down your answer).

A9 HOME PAGE REVIEW

A9's design is definitely in keeping with the trends of the clean, down-to-business interface; it offers little more than a search bar along with "Home Page Tools" awaiting your historical search results. The design is reasonably attractive and none of the buttons appear to be superfluous. Here is a rundown of what each tool bar offers:



History Tool

Similar to the History bar within Internet Explorer this tool differentiates itself by offering a listing of previous searches rather than pages. Loaded by default, the history tab shows recent sites visited and further breaks down into hierarchical folders historical data spans more than 24hrs.

My Take: This is a great tool for the disabled (if the site were actually accessible) because it reduces the need for retyping search queries. Unfortunately the negatives seem to outweigh the positives considering that the history is there for anyone to see including the easily offended... not to mention children... a serious issue at Internet Cafes where users are not necessarily reputable. Users will have to remember to "Sign Out" which I am guessing will not be a natural concept for most search engine users.

Bookmarks Tool

This tool is not functional unless the user installs the A9 toolbar. Once it is installed it acts as an online version of your browser shortcuts similar to the free service offered by [Backflip.com](#).

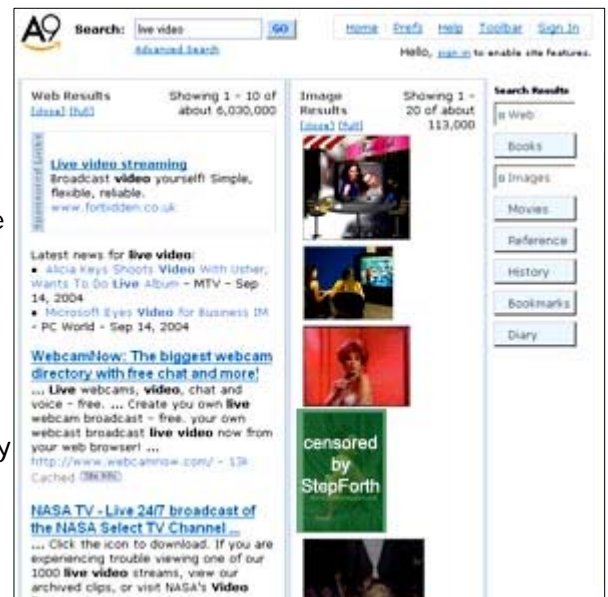
Discover Tool

This tool provides differing methods of search based on search history. This tool is the closest that A9 comes to true personalization by providing a combined list of web sites and directories based on previous searches in the following manner: "Related Websites", "Categories", "Frequently Visited Sites" and "Movers and Shakers" which are sites experiencing the most growth according to Alexa's data.

Essentially the home page is designed to be a true launching platform for various types of search without the tired secondary search options such as a directory or an alphabetical interface.

A9 RESULT PAGE REVIEW

The results on A9 have been "enhanced by Google" but after some extensive search testing it is obvious that A9 is merely a technology-laden jacket for Google results. That said, the jacket is extremely well designed and short of one significant flaw I believe these result pages will put A9 on the map as a major player; especially if they begin to use unique search engine results. What is the flaw? This is a big one that is sure to raise the ire of many people! First users will experience a default results page that has text results in one column and image results in thumbnail format in the right column. As a result, any user first searching the site, including children, will immediately have only moderately censored image results appearing directly beside their text results. These image results are provided by Google Images and as with any search there is a very real chance that highly explicit adult content will make it into an otherwise innocent search result. Take the phrase "live video" for example, the text results for this phrase are up to Google's high quality, however, at least one of the first 10 image results show a naked 'teen'. Not exactly something that will endear A9 to parents. The issue is a simple one to fix for A9; just change the default search filter setting for first users to "Strict" which filters out "both explicit text and explicit images."



Ultimately the results page has a considerable number of clever integrated technologies such as search related books, movies, and reference. I urge you to check out this service, judge it for yourself and send us your feedback on this new engine. Please send your feedback to ross@stepforth.com.

A9 IN SUMMARY

A9 may not be a 9 out of 10 but it is one of the most impressive leaps in personalization to date. In fact, other than the significant censorship issue and its distinct lack of accessibility (disabled access - see YouSearched.com for accessible search), I find the layout of A9 result pages intuitive and informative. Just don't surf it with your children until you have it properly configured.