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## **MSN(beta) is Now Live**

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MSN has removed the beta -wrap from its proprietary search engine and is now showing self-generated results at MSN.Com. Beta results had started bleeding into MSN listings over the past three weeks but since Sunday (Jan 16), the .COM (US / Global) version of MSN has consistently mirrored those found at MSN(beta). Regional versions of MSN continue to display Inktomi (Yahoo owned) / Regional partner generated results (Jan19, 05).

At this time two years ago, Google was the only major search database, feeding search results to Yahoo and eventually by extension to MSN. Around this time last year, Yahoo began to break away from Google by amalgamating data from its acquisitions of Overture, AlltheWeb, AltaVista and Inktomi into a monster data base built on the dbase they bought from FAST. This was a huge project that resulted in a database almost as large as Google's. When Yahoo stopped using Google generated results, MSN stopped showing them as well. At the same time, a new spider named MSNbot was making its presence known, appearing in our clients' server-logs with amazing frequency.

The introduction of an MSN search engine makes the business world of search a lot more interesting and might help open the door for other smaller firms such as Lycos and Ask Jeeves to gain a toehold against Google. However MSN changes the business of search, it will help improve on the science of it by innovation rather than invention.

The engineers at MSN have had the luxury of watching everyone else invent dozens of wheels. They have had the time to see what works well and what makes money. They have watched great ideas that should have succeeded fall to failure and not so great ideas flourish until the market determined their death. Having created much of the environment themselves, they also know the histories of the web and appear to have learned when to act and when to lay-low.

The search engine that they have produced takes factors that worked well for others and combined them to make what could become a very popular search tool.

Like Google, MSN's spider finds new sites by following links directed to those sites. MSNbot is active all the time. So active in fact that about five weeks ago a few webmasters reported so many visits their servers crashed. MSN revisits sites very frequently. Over the past year, MSN has compiled a 5-Billion site database.

Once a site is in the database, MSN looks at the number of links directed to that site. There is no hard data on the role topical relevancy plays in how MSN determines links however it is assumed by most that anchor text plays a major role. (Anchor text did factor in our initial tests however with the beta version of the engine)

Next, MSN looks at the content of the site. This is where much of the ranking determination is made. Sites with great text and clear internal link-paths are ranking very well with MSN. Of our entire client base, only one site with excellent text and internal linking lost a top placement at MSN when the new version was introduced. Strong, keyword enriched titles and body texts continue to provide strong placements. We are fairly certain that the anchor text of internal links can influence placements as well.

Size matters with MSN as larger sites with long-term content appear to be doing very well under more generic keyword searches. Content rich news and information sites and large corporate sites should be able to leverage their size and content-scope into high placements. The size and content-scope factor should also work well with large e-commerce sites, provided a very clear mapping technique makes the site as easy to access as possible for MSNbot.

There is a simple experiment that folks should run every time a new search engine is introduced or a new algorithm is applied. Open three browser windows (or click on the following links) and cue up [MSN.Com](http://MSN.Com), [Google.Com](http://Google.Com), and [Yahoo.Com](http://Yahoo.Com). Enter a keyword phrase important to your business or interests. For this example, I will use one I am familiar with, "Artificial Turf".

Look for similarities between what you know works at Google and Yahoo and you can learn what works well at MSN. The Field Turf website ranks #1 at each of the Big3 under the phrase "artificial turf". The index page itself is dynamically generated and does not always present the same text information limiting the effectiveness of seo-copyrighting and keyword densities. There are several remaining areas on the site SEO work could be applied and a number of off-site factors that collectively contribute to the site's top placements. Based on this simple test, we can determine the following.

A website that has a large number of incoming links will get noticed and spidered a number of times. Google recognizes 131 unique domains linking to the Field Turf website. Yahoo notes over 1000. MSN sees far more, weighing in above 1500. Next, note the "quality" of incoming links. Google is taking a very refined approach to contextual-quality while Yahoo and MSN seem more interested in the number of links.

Titles make a big difference at all three and are an important area to work on when doing basic SEO for MSN. MSN also seems to be able to read text found in drop-down menus such as the ones on the right hand side of the Field Turf index page.

Another important factor in improving and retaining rankings is updating the site. MSN states on its "How MSN Search Works" page that pages that are active will be spidered more frequently and achieve stronger rankings.

The business of search has changed radically over the past four months, working through a scenario that has been building for about two years. MSN going live with their own search engine is huge news with as many unknown implications as known ones. Its presence will challenge many basic assumptions about SEO and will play a large hand in determining the future of the search industry itself. The greatest general change is the burst of corporate diversity and identity in the search marketplace. A range of new products and services has been introduced by every search tool from the Big3 to the dozen or so smaller but notable search firms. Google is buying ad-space and fiber optics. Yahoo is reporting massive earnings as it pushes into the Chinese market, and MSN is suddenly in the house, so to speak. The precursors of change are written on the wall and MSN is betting much of that change will be found between the walls of your home.

More on MSN very soon.