

## **School Kids Search Too**

**By Jim Hedger, StepForth News Editor, [StepForth Placement Inc.](#)**

One week left. That's it. One week from the time this piece is being written the school doors open and the dog-days come to a close. Summer is over in seven days for tens of millions of students across North America. Going back to school is both exciting and anti-climactic, at least if I remember correctly. It has been quite a few years since I sat on the students' side of the lecture podium. Today, my only experience with schooling is as an infrequent guest lecturer at the University of Victoria or at one of the local technical colleges. My career as a student ended long before the advent of the commercial Internet.

Back in the olden days, we had to pour through books, periodicals, encyclopaedias and government records to research essays, papers and large projects. We had to learn to use the library. In order to find information quickly and easily, we had to learn the Dewey Decimal System, a seemingly clunky but efficient numeric ordering system. Apparently, something has shifted over the past fifteen years and my impression of a student's life is completely out of touch.

I am currently on vacation in southern Ontario visiting friends and family. Joining me is my brother and his two sons from Calgary. While my brother went to catch up with his old friends, I took Justin and Tyler to the nearest cybercafe to see how they related to and used search engines. My research method was anything but scientific. I drew up a short list of topics an eight year old and a fourteen year old might need to research for school essays and asked them to find a sufficient amount of information to write an essay using whatever search engines they thought would provide them with references.

According to my public-school aged nephews, Justin and Tyler, libraries are entirely organized alphabetically and the proper way to find information is to look it up on Google. Mention of the wonders of the Dewey Decimal System brought blank stares until Tyler tried to brazen his way through by explaining that the Calgary School Board used the numbers on the spine of the book to see who has them. To be honest, I am not sure how that works out but I have an obligation to report it as I hear it and that's what he said.

I learned a few things in the process, some of which might be good for the major search engines to hear about.

First of all, though my brother does not keep a computer at home and the two boys attend different schools, both claim that Google is the only search engine worth using. Tyler, aged 8, relies on Google exclusively because, "It gives me the most information back". Justin, aged 14, likes Google because it is simple to use and has a sparse, uncluttered front page. As far as my brother's kids are concerned, there is no other search tool worth using. They say their friends feel the same way.

I tried to prompt them on other search engines. The only one they knew about was Yahoo and according to Tyler (who really is quite bright), "Yahoo doesn't give me much information but Google gives me pages and pages." Hearing this, I tried to prompt him further by telling him that Yahoo claimed to have several billion more documents and objects in its database than Google did. Stone faced silence. "Uncle Jeeem", Tyler said, "everyone knows Google is the best."

I wonder where the line is drawn between the mouths of babes and the horse's mouth. In a competitive environment reliant on user loyalty, Google's hold on the hearts of today's school kids suggests a massive portal into their minds both today and in the future.

Neither nephew was particularly interested in paid-advertising and both expressed surprise when I pointed out the text-ads above and to the right hand side of search results. Apparently, neither had actually noticed the paid ads before having them pointed out by old Uncle Jim.

When he did see them, Justin identified them as "useless", at least to him. "I don't click on them because they often lead to forms, endless surveys and stuff you have to fill out, stuff I just don't need. They are just junk, a waste of time". Even after I informed him that Google makes the bulk of its vast revenues from the click-fees associated with paid-advertising, he seemed relatively uninterested in anything other than the word 'billions'. When I told him how much Google's revenues were last quarter he said something I don't think he would want his father to read in print. Justin is a born-again punk rocker and as such has developed a somewhat cynical outer shell. I didn't bother to get into the difference between revenues and profits as I was laughing too hard.

As the boys embarked on their impromptu research projects, I watched how they interacted with the search engine and with the Internet Explorer web-browser used by that cybercafe. The older of the two, Justin used more sophisticated search strings, entering two or more words for his queries on every search. Tyler on the other hand, almost always used only one word. Naturally, Justin found the information he was looking for faster, often on the first page of results. Looking over at the machine Tyler was working on, I noticed how he compensated for a lack of clarity by drilling down in search results until he found what he was looking for, sometimes on the third, fourth or even fifth pages of results. He didn't seem to mind. It was as if the search itself was an adventure though I am not sure if that had something to do with me hanging over his shoulder asking a bunch of questions and taking an obvious interest in his experience.

One research habit the two brothers shared was the way each would keep the browser windows open to pages, sites or documents that contained information relevant to their search challenges. They would just open a new browser window when they wanted to conduct another search. Forgetting they didn't have a computer at home, I asked why they just didn't bookmark the pages to reference later.

"There are a lot of other kids using the computers in the library", said Justin, "the bookmarks are too full to find anything." Tyler agreed adding that most of the bookmarks on computers in his schools were for game sites.

That's about the time my cell phone rang. It was a local radio station from back home in Victoria BC wanting to do an interview with me. I stepped outside, leaving Justin in charge. The interview lasted about fifteen minutes and when I came back in, Justin was surfing a Marilyn Manson site which could have passed as a fan site from the movie A Clockwork Orange. Two feet to the left of him, Tyler had found a page full of dirty and/or corny jokes and was cracking up reading them out loud to the chagrin of some of the other patrons. It was obviously time to leave.

In a few years, Justin will hopefully be entering college or university. Tyler is sure to follow. When they get there, they will face the prospect of paying absurd fees for text-books, many of which are priced above \$100. Those familiar with college level text books know that they rarely differ from year to year in substance but do have unique material added in order to force the purchase and bolster the bottom line



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for paper publishers. If you were a student in today's educational environment, where would you look for this information? Increasingly, students are turning to the Internet and their primary gateway to the 'net appears to be Google.

My nephews are both pretty smart young Internet users. I was surprised at some of the stuff they had to say and some of the ways they use search engines but I know enough to listen closely. Yahoo, MSN and yes, Google too should listen up as well.