



## The Star-Ledger

### Google rivals put man in machine

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Google doesn't have all the answers.

That's the hook behind a type of search service emphasizing an element that's often missing from the complex algorithms and wizardry used to generate results at Google and other traditional search engines -- people.

Though the methods differ, these services all try, with varying degrees of success, to bring a human element to the search experience. The idea is an appealing one. Who hasn't wondered, after a meandering, time-consuming and eventually fruitless Google search, whether you would just be better off calling someone and asking for an answer to your question. But who?

People-powered search services, as this emerging trend is sometimes labeled, don't necessarily deliver direct contact with another human being, but they do aim to make search results smarter and less random by bringing a human element into the mix.

Among the latest crop of startups tackling people-powered search, ChaCha takes a refreshingly useful approach by giving you the chance to connect and communicate with a live, online guide -- yes, a real person -- to help you answer your query. When you visit ChaCha, enter your query and select "search with guide." As you "chat" with the guide in one window, typically adding focus to your question, the guide's search results appear in the other.

I had mixed results with this. I started with a controversial question: What is New Jersey's black bear population? My guide, Juliet, turned up a combination of helpful, outdated and irrelevant links. Among them were a 2-year-old USA Today article and a page from the state Division of Fish and Wildlife. The results only seemed to skim the surface.

Another search, for a list of novels set in New Jersey, caused some confusion. "Does this have to do with sports?" the guide asked me. Obviously not. Soon enough, I was transferred to another guide, who provided a few useful pages. Were my questions too challenging? I don't think so. After all, if a question is obvious, you wouldn't seek the help of a guide.

Though ChaCha seems promising, you might be better off heading to QandANJ.org, a free service offering help from professional librarians. Like ChaCha, QandANJ.org provides real-time help, with results appearing in one window as you chat in the other. Another service, Askville.com (from retailer Amazon), lets you ask questions of other community members.

Unfortunately, you have to wait for others to respond -- sometimes not for several days. I asked what you should do if you encounter a black bear in the wild. By the next day, I had generally informative answers from five people, some of whom provided the source of their information and related Web addresses. If your query isn't urgent, Askville.com can be a handy source of free research.

Mahalo takes another route entirely, with the goal of having people "hand-write the top 20,000 search terms." Rather than getting a list of unsorted links from a Mahalo search, you get a tutorial or a categorized list of reliable, informative links -- if, that is, your search term has already been written.

Though these services add a new twist to search, they have a way to go. Competition for Google and Yahoo? Not quite. Many of us have honed our online search skills in recent years and feel pretty satisfied with the results we get. You don't need to know much to narrow a search query and turn up useful results. If you think you need a few tips on this, just enter the query "search tips Google" or "search tips Yahoo"; minutes later, you'll be on your way toward becoming a search pro -- essentially a must-have skill in today's information-crammed age.

And if you want a person's help? Turn to QandANJ.org, or just pick up the phone and call someone who probably has the answer.

### **TECHscan**

Sometimes you just need to sketch out an idea to explain it. That's the idea behind Sketchcast.com, a site that lets you create quick whiteboard-style sketches. Once you've created a sketch, you can display it on your blog or home page, or else direct people to your own "channel" at Sketchcast.com. A viewer clicks the "play" button, and your sketch is played back, just as if you were there drawing it.

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