

# Search Boxes

By Richard Lowe

## Search Boxes

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Internet Tips And Secrets <http://www.internet-tips.net>

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One of my pet peeves is webmasters which make it difficult for me to use their site. I mean, I'm there, looking at a page and I just cannot find what I want. I look everywhere for navigation, and what I want to find just doesn't seem to be covered. That's not necessarily a problem, as everything cannot be always be handled by the navigation menus.

Okay, what's the next thing I'm going to look for? A search box, a site map or some other, more general way to find the information that I need. Site maps can be difficult to maintain unless they are very general (which, in turn, makes them less useful). Search boxes, on the other hand, require no care and feeding at all once you've got them installed (although you should spend some time tuning them to make them even more useful).

If you have a site with a large amount of information or a site which is very diverse, a search box is your best bet.

- First of all, it allows your visitors to find things that they might not otherwise find.
- It causes visitors to go deeper into your site, to stay longer and to look around more.
- Just as important, very little maintenance is required.
- In addition, most of the search utilities are free for small sites.

- The pay versions are extremely inexpensive for the benefits they provide.
- It just makes your site (no matter how large or how small) look more professional.

Some of the unexpected side effects include:

- You make it even more likely that your visitors can wind up on any page. This means your site navigation must be very good or your visitors will get lost.
- Visitors will find themselves dumped onto pages on your site which you did not intend for them to find. Under construction pages, "spam traps" and anything else you've got. Be sure to use metatags and the Robots.Txt file to control indexing well.

You have several options when choosing a search box for your site.

- If you edit your site using Microsoft FrontPage, you could use the built-in search functions. Note that the searching facilities in FrontPage are so lame that personally I would not recommend them to anyone.
- You could use a self-hosted script if your host allows CGI routines. I would not recommend this method, as these routines tend to be very server intensive. In fact, most web hosts that I have found will not allow them to run.
- The best option is to use one of the remotely-hosted search functions for your site.

I have found three excellent remotely-hosted search companies.

Atomz - Probably the overall best of the bunch, but also the most expensive by far. I liked Atomz, but we switched because it just became too costly. Atomz allows up to 500 pages to be spidered for free, with advertisements in your results pages.

<http://www.internet-tips.net/Products/atomz.htm>

Freefind - Excellent service, and the one that we settled on because it was very full functioned and inexpensive. The version for personal or nonprofit sites is only \$19 per month, a year paid in advance. Up to 32mb of pages can be spidered for free.

<http://www.freefind.com/indexc.html>

Whatuseek - Another excellent service, allowing up to 1,000 pages to be spidered for free.

<http://intra.whatuseek.com/index.shtml>

Each of these services has it's own advantages and disadvantages, but all of them work basically the same. My recommendation is to try out all three services using their free versions to determine exactly which one is the best for your needs. Then go ahead and purchase the paid version for the correct fit.

How does this all work? Well, once you sign you for an account you supply the URL for your web site. You then define a template for the results page, or you can use one of the basic templates that each service provides. All three services allow you to define a template (in advanced mode) which looks exactly like your site. You then define any special parameters such as pages to exclude, usernames

and passwords for protected pages and so on. Once that's done, you install the search code on each of your web pages, then tell the search utility to spider your site.

It's as simple as that. I fully tested each of the three search companies in about an eight hour day before finally settling on the one that best met the requirements of my site.

Okay, so let's say you now have chosen a search function for your site, you've created the perfect template and you've got your HTML code. What else do you need to do?

- Put the search box in a very prominent spot on your site. The upper left-hand corner is by far the most visible location, and it's a great choice. Make sure that it is at least "above the fold".

- Put the box on every single page.

- Always try out the product with the free version.

- Once you've settled on the search function you like, get the paid version if you can afford it. The paid version looks more professional because it has no advertisements.

- Use the advanced template function to make your results pages look identical to your site.

- If the search function has synonyms (FreeFind does not appear to have this feature), then take advantage to guide your visitors.

- Read the reports each search function produces to find out what people are searching for. Tune your site as appropriate. For example, if you have a site about "asthma" and people are searching for "breathing machines", then be sure and include a page on breathing machines, with the appropriate metatags. This is an excellent way to improve your site.

- Each of these search functions has ways to tune the results. Over time, as you examine reports, use them to make your visitors searches more accurate.

- While you are tuning for your on-site search, don't forget the other search engines. For example, while you are fixing up a page for your own search engine, add the appropriate metatags, titles, descriptions and such. After a while, you may find yourself thinking more and more like a search engine, which means you may get a side benefit of making your site more search engine friendly overall.

- Be careful when asking these functions to spider your site, especially if you have a large site. You can use up a lot of your

host's resources to no good benefit unless you are careful. It's always wise to spend the few seconds to think about what you are doing from your hosts point of view - it can save hassles later on.

- I like to schedule my spidering for once a week. It's often enough to catch changes quickly, but not so often to put a huge burden on my host.

I would also like to point out that you have a lot of control over these search functions. Tuning your site to use one of them well has some major side benefits:

- They all use the "description" metatag, so improving your descriptions helps your personal search. It also helps your site get better listings in some major search engines.

- These functions also use "keyword" metatags, which also helps you with some of the major search engines.

- Since you can make changes to your site, spider, then test to see the result, you get a better idea of how search results look to people. You will almost certainly find (as I did) that the search engine does not display what I thought it was displaying for descriptions of pages. Some quick tuning, and my visitors got not only better search results, but better descriptions of the pages that were found.

- As you look at reports, you will find people are looking for synonyms a lot, and thus not finding pages that they should. As you improve your keyword metatags to help them out, you will also help out your sites performance in other search engines.

Another good idea as you become more savvy is to put some of the search terms from your reports into the major search engines to see what comes up. If your site shows up, look at how it is described. Then tune your site accordingly.

So as you can see, adding a search box is easy, inexpensive (or even free), and has many benefits to both you and your visitors. Perhaps you should check it out.

## Additional Information

### Free stuff Headquarters

<http://www.internet-tips.net/Freestuff/Freesearch.htm>

Search Utilities These services allow you to add a search box to your site.

### HTML tag reference guide - META

<http://www.internet-tips.net/HTML/META.htm>

### HTML tag reference guide - META name description

[http://www.internet-tips.net/HTML/META\\_name\\_description.htm](http://www.internet-tips.net/HTML/META_name_description.htm)

### HTML tag reference guide - META name keywords

[http://www.internet-tips.net/HTML/META\\_name\\_keywords.htm](http://www.internet-tips.net/HTML/META_name_keywords.htm)

### HTML tag reference guide - META name robots

[http://www.internet-tips.net/HTML/META\\_name\\_robots.htm](http://www.internet-tips.net/HTML/META_name_robots.htm)

### HTML tag reference guide - TITLE

<http://www.internet-tips.net/HTML/TITLE.htm>

### Meta-Tags

<http://www.internet-tips.net/Webmaster/metatags.htm>

Be sure and set up your meta-tags properly if you want to be found by some search engines.

### Use ROBOTS.TXT to control search engine indexing

<http://www.internet-tips.net/Advertising/robots.htm>

You can use ROBOTS.TXT to keep search engines from indexing parts of your site

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