

# Meeting Reports

## How to make Google Behave: techniques for better results

Presented by Karen Blakeman at the University of Birmingham, 8 February 2012

Have you ever wondered exactly what Google is doing when it carries out your search? Did you, like me, think that when you put in search terms Google would automatically AND them? As information professionals most of us make assumptions about how it is searching, based on our knowledge of search software used by bibliographic database providers etc. However, nobody really knows what algorithms Google uses. In this one-day event, Karen Blakeman showed us how to get the best out of Google by understanding better how Google allows us to influence search results using its many underused, and sometimes under promoted features.

There was a great deal of detail in the course, but fortunately Karen has made her slides, exercises and notes on selected Google commands available on her website/blog ([www.rba.co.uk](http://www.rba.co.uk)). I will therefore restrict myself here with highlighting some of the themes of the day, and my personal perspective on them.

I learnt a great deal on this course, but two things stood out. Firstly, the need to understand where Google was coming from. Google is not designed for information professionals, it is designed for

the public; and it is paid for by advertising. So, their aim is not to do good searches, but to find some useful sights and to get people to look at their ads. Armed with this knowledge, you can proceed to make Google work for you. Secondly, there is the ever-changing nature of Google. Being a free service they do not need to be consistent, and they constantly try things and then abandon them if they don't work, and don't tell the public what they are doing - it is only real keenies who monitor email lists, blogs and so on, who find out about these things.

Personalisation is another important feature of Google. This allows you to receive local information, and information that may perhaps be more relevant to your needs. The down-side is that Google collects a great deal of information about you. Log on to your Google account and look at your dashboard. Even if you don't have a Google account, a lot of information can be collected by your browser. Disabling cookies will help with the latter. This information allows Google to target advertising to you. It is also factored in to your searches, so that the search results are displayed according to what Google thinks you want. This means that the same search done by different people will produce different results. This will be

a challenge for librarians trying to help users with their searches. The good news is you can remove items from your dashboard, so that Google has less information about you - but the result of this is that Google now thinks it knows better than you do what you want to search for. Karen gave an example of a search for coots mating which retrieved lions mating - apparently Google was convinced she meant 'cat' instead of 'coot'. This has now been rectified.

It was an information-intensive course, but there was a good balance between presentation and practice. Karen gave us exercises, but made it plain we could explore whatever she wanted and she would come around and help in any way she could. I usually do exercises from the beginning to the end, but in this case the information was so much that I decided to take it easy in the hands-on part and just explore a few things that took my fancy - I had the slides and notes to go back to in the future. This worked well for me.

Other things I found useful were the information on Google commands, and I discovered a lot of new things from Google sidebar searches, for

example share prices (finance), graphs of nations debts as a percentage of GDP (statistics) how to see if anyone has photos of you on the internet (images) Google sidebar (finance, images, verbatim etc.) "Verbatim" is particularly useful as it does a phrase search (quote marks do not always work). If there was one thing I could have changed from the course, it would probably be to include more information on Google Scholar, as this would be particularly useful to those of us involved in higher education, although I do realise that this course was aimed at a wider audience.

I have a busy job, and do not have the time to explore Google in order to use it more efficiently. This course enabled me to get an enormous amount of knowledge in a relatively short time, from someone who has done this work thoroughly. I now feel much more confident when talking to students that I know more about Google than they do, and am more confident about explaining to them what its role is in gathering information for their learning and research.

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