Using Internet Search Tools

It’s easy . . . it’s convenient . . . it’s free. Google knows everything! Hmm . . . perhaps not!

Bing, Google, Yahoo, DuckDuckGo and many, many others. There’s zillions of websites out there, and search engines are invaluable toward helping to sort through them. Like any tool, you need to use it carefully.

Free? Not really.

I’ll go along with easy and convenient, but not so much with free. Search services are a business, and they are expensive to run. Like any business, they want a profit for their efforts. Search engines often will offer better listing placement for a fee (you might see the word ‘sponsored’ with the first several search results). In addition, a huge way they make money is selling data. When you use a search engine, the search provider now knows that a person using a computer in a particular area of a city is looking for a specific piece of information. They sell that data, and companies buy it. In addition, if you are a user who logged into the provider’s account, they also have your age, gender, and whatever other data they have, to sell along with where you are and that you are searching for. You give these search engines a lot of information that is not ‘personally identifiable data’, and selling it is how they make their money. It’s not free . . . you trade something for it.

Where is your information coming from?

When you search for something, be alert to where the results came from. Anybody can get a website (whether they are reputable or not), and search engine results reflect frequency of use, and not the reputation of who bought the website. This is

especially true for services you need quickly, and don't need often, like a plumber or weight loss assistance, for example.

Be careful about what you rely on. It may be better to ask a trusted professional for information, rather than the internet. Perhaps you know someone who can share their personal experience.

Look at the websites that the search engine provides to you. Is it an organization you recognize and trust, or is it a company you never heard of. If it's a product or a service you are searching, are there reviews and ratings (How many reviews and ratings?). Is it a 'sponsored' search result? The fact that is is sponsored does not necessarily mean it's bad, but it is something to consider.

Keep in mind that search engines DO NOT sort for quality, they sort for previous visibility. If you search for the weather, hurricane Katrina had lots and lots of visibility, but that doesn't make the hurricane a good thing! Also, there are companies out there that help websites improve their search engine visibility, for a fee.

This is the most important advice that I have . . . a search engine is **not** where you should turn for expert advice. If the situation calls for an expert, then go to the expert. Call your doctor, your lawyer, or whatever expert you should, and get advice from them. The best you can hope for from a search engine, is interesting trivia. The information you receive may be entirely worthless, or perhaps dangerous. Use discretion with the results.