

17 tips you need to know to make you a super searcher on Google

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"I love your tips," a woman said to me recently.

That got me thinking. What are the best tips I could share with you to

ensure that you're a super-consumer who buys only the best products, hires the best people and knows how to avoid scams?

The most important consumer tool "the magic Google box."

Google is magic. Life before Google stunk. You had to work the Yellow Pages, make phone calls, visit a library, stop at store after store to find the exact product you sought.

What once could take hours now takes seconds.

I've put together this list of Google tips. How many do you know and use?

1. Know which links are ads, and which aren't. Until a couple of years ago, Google placed most of the paid advertised websites on the right side of search results. Search results and paid ads were clearly separated. But then Google moved the paid ads to the top of search results. Now the only way to tell if a result is an ad is by looking for a tiny square box at the front of the result marked "AD." I bet many people miss it.

I usually skip the ads and burrow down lower on the front page to find non-advertised results.

2. Don't stay on the front page. Dig deeper. Many of us don't go past the first search results page. Good results are often deeper inside.

3. Search first. One of the cardinal rules of Watchdog Nation is to always search before buying something or hiring someone. Use a company's name and location with key words: John Doe Plumbing of Carrollton, for example.

Then test other keywords with that: complaints, reviews, scam. Better to

do this before rather than after.

For products, try the manufacturer, the model number of the product, the name of the store where you may buy the item: Frigidaire model 39-A at Best Buy and complaints.

4. The best part might be on the bottom of page 1. At the bottom, you'll find a section headlined "Search terms related to ... " Those are the phrases others use to find answers to queries that are similar to yours.

5. Be suspicious. Although Google has made improvements, scammers still know how to game the setup. Companies also use ads and search results to steal business from competitors. For example, you're looking for that plumbing company you used a couple of years ago, but a competitor figured out a way to intercept you. One popular method is populating Google Maps to make it look like a company is close to you when it's not. Bottom line: Double-check before clicking on the link that calls the company. Search again for your target in a different way. Find the company's actual website.

6. Don't forget the "News" tab. Most of us use the "All" tab on Google because it's the first one listed. But don't forget to slide over and use "News" also. That search often brings up more recent information on the subject.

7. Auto-complete is a favorite. Go to the magic search box and type in the start of your query and see what choices pop up. The words that automatically fill in are indicative of what most people are asking.

8. Use private browsing. If you're signed into Google, Google knows who you are and where you live—and delivers search results accordingly. To hide your identity from Google, use the private browser. In Chrome, it's called Incognito. In Safari, it's called Private Window. In

Firefox, it's called Private Browsing. Why do this? When searching for personal health questions, for example, it's best to keep the most private questions as private as possible. It's still traceable, but it doesn't show up in your search history—and should provide another level of privacy.

9. Remember that Google has competitors. Microsoft's Bing is one. DuckDuckGo is another search engine that promises to protect your privacy.

10. Google tries to keep you. Google now tries to answer popular questions on its main page so you don't click away. One way is a fairly new "Knowledge Panel," which pulls information and presents it in a box. You've seen it. Often the knowledge provided is good enough (How old is a celebrity?). But don't stop there.

11. Use the minus symbol before a word to exclude that word from search results.

12. Pay attention to how you arrange your words. Lisa Eadicicco, who attended a Google search class, points out that "dog chow" and "chow dog" bring up very different results. "One refers to pet food while the other is the name of a breed of dog," she writes on BusinessInsider.com.

13. Wikipedia? Nah. Google loves to return Wikipedia results high. But Wikipedia is not a truly verified source. False information has been planted in Wikipedia. If you rely on Wikipedia, scroll down to the list of sources for that article, and double-check that way.

14. Use a colon to search a particular website. For example:
dallasnews.com: dave lieber watchdog column and property tax.

15. Be wary of phrase stealers. Let's say you're shopping for electricity and you want to visit the state's website, PowerToChoose.org. You type

in "power to choose," but Google leads you instead to electricity companies that, unethically, use the same phrase. The real PowerToChoose.org shows up lower. (The problem is so bad that last week, the Public Utility Commission put out a news release warning about this.)

16. Is your final result legitimate? Who is behind the website? What's their motive? Is it really a consumer information site? Or is it a front for a specific company?

17. Finally, don't forget your human [search](#) engines. They are called librarians. They know how to find stuff better than almost anybody. Your [taxpayer dollars](#) help pay for reference librarians at your neighborhood public library. Don't be shy. They are there to help.

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