

WolframAlpha POV

John “Mac” Morgan and Jenny Du, June 2009

[WolframAlpha](#) is the highly anticipated search engine from the makers of [Mathematica](#), which launched on May 15, 2009. Some have proclaimed WolframAlpha as the next “Google killer,” but in reality, Google is not its direct competitor.

WolframAlpha is self-described as a “computational knowledge engine.” Therefore, you can ask factual queries, and it will deliver definitive answers in a structured format. But, what does that really mean?

You can ask WolframAlpha about the population of Iceland, present it with a mathematical equation, or find the airspeed of an Unladen Swallow (example below). However, when asked about hotels in Las Vegas, this search engine notifies you that it does not know what to do with the information you provided.

An example of WolframAlpha’s response to one of these “failure” questions is shown below:

Query: “What is the airspeed velocity of an Unladen Swallow?”

Input interpretation: Estimated average cruising airspeed of an Unladen African Swallow.

Result: There is unfortunately insufficient data to estimate the velocity of an African Swallow (even if the search request specified one of the 47 species of swallow found in Africa).

If you search for “Las Vegas hotel,” WolframAlpha will not find hotel recommendations in Las Vegas, nor will the search engine find the best deal on a digital camera for the search phrase “digital camera sale.”

As a result, WolframAlpha does not provide direct competition with Google, but instead lines up with Wikipedia. To further support this conclusion, the following facts have been considered:

- A “Search the Web” link on every result page of WolframAlpha defaults to Google’s search results, but also allows Yahoo and Bing as options.
- Users can [participate in WolframAlpha](#) by submitting facts, figures, structured data, etc.
- Users can apply to be [WolframAlpha curators](#) to help manage and verify facts, much like Wikipedians (Wikipedia editors).

How can marketers take advantage of opportunities on WolframAlpha? The options are limited. WolframAlpha currently pulls its data from trusted sources such as governments, third-party data providers, etc., as opposed to crawling the web like traditional search engines.

Note that if you come across incorrect information for client-related content, there is an option at the bottom of the results page to submit feedback. It is suggested that a reference is included to support the correction.

While a sponsorship opportunity is available on WolframAlpha that allows an ad to appear within select (relevant) pages, a lot of details are missing about requirements and costs. The featured sponsor link that appears includes both paid and organic benefits:

- Paid search is where a listing can be sponsored across the site.
 - However, it only appears on select pages displaying the sponsored listing
- Organic search
 - The results would be recognized as a back link from WolframAlpha
 - “No follow” tags are not used
 - The anchor text might be customizable to use targeted keywords instead of the destination page URL.

Over the past two years, we have seen the engines incorporate video, news, local, image and additional features into search results with the intention of getting closer to what the searcher is looking for in fewer clicks. This trend is gaining more momentum. Look at Yahoo’s search results; logos and images are added to verticals such as hotels and restaurants ([Yahoo “Starwood hotel”](#) to see example). Take it even further, and [Google Squared](#) provides structured results in a spreadsheet format, and Microsoft is also integrating structured results into [Bing](#). The face of the search space is changing as we know it today.

Although WolframAlpha is not a search engine, this new service provides intuitive ways (particularly through more organic search) to help our clients further develop their presence online.

About the Authors

John “Mac” Morgan grew up in the Philadelphia area. After earning a Bachelors of Computer Science from the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in upstate New York, he returned to Philadelphia to work as a Software Engineer at Razorfish (then i-Frontier). After leaving for a short period of time, Mac’s career path and experience developing software led him to return to Razorfish, where he currently works as a Sr. Software Engineer.

While at Razorfish, Mac has contributed to the development of proprietary technologies SEOSource and SEODirect, the agency’s feed management applications, and maintains each to guarantee peak performance for clients, and the Global Solutions team at Razorfish.



Jenny Du joined Razorfish in 2007 as an SEO Account Manager after over four years as a Senior Manager at Digitas Health. She has worked in the digital space, including experience with SEO and Web Analytics, for more than six years. As a Senior Account Manager at Razorfish, Jenny manages SEO and Web Analytics projects. She is also the co-host of the Web Analytics monthly event in Philadelphia, scheduling and finding sponsors for the event that have so far included Google, Omniture, WebTrends, and other leaders in the field.

Jenny grew up in Philadelphia and graduated from Drexel University with a Bachelor's of Science in Business, Marketing. She has put that degree to good use by working with companies in the area ranging from healthcare and management services to staffing and restaurants.

About Razorfish™

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