**Antelope Valley Microcomputer Users Group**

# AVMUG Newsletter

**May, 2004**

## Next AVMUG Meeting:

- *Wed. May 19, 2004*
- *7:00 P.M.*
- *Lancaster Senior Center*
- *777 West Jackman*
- *Lancaster, CA*
- *Information: 661/942-1912*

## May Meeting

We will be starting our Workgroup settings in this months meeting. These are discussed at length in this month's "President's Corner, on page 6 of this newsletter.

I think everybody will appreciate this new meeting format. Don't miss this meeting!



Photo courtesy of member Ray Santana

# For beginners only: Using Internet to increase buying power

Buying on the Internet may intimidate some (not me) but the Internet can serve other purposes, such as a way to check prices against what you can find locally or in other nearby stores.

Ten years ago, I can't tell you the times I would buy something and then two weeks later find it for $50 or $100 less at another store in another city or town.  After the normal fussing, I'd blame myself for bad judgment, although in those days I had no way of avoiding it.

Now, though, with the Internet, there is no excuse.

First, a couple of points to remember about the Internet:

• Items, in most cases, will be less expensive on the Internet.

• Shipping costs must always be added into the cost of an item.

• In some cases, you might save on taxes, but that depends on several factors.

• Chain stores, such as Wal-Mart, Target or Best Buy, usually charge the same for an item, even if it's in another state.

• Some items might be refurbished or reconditioned, so make sure that the item you're looking at is actually new because used items will be priced less.

There's several ways to check the price of an item, but you must do some homework first.

• Get the item's name and model.

• If you can't get all that information, get as much as you can.

• Plug that information into a search engine site, such as www.google.com.

• To get "real people" reviews of products, type that same name into www.deja.com.

Another way to use the Internet is to check the features of different models or the features of a model you're thinking about buying. This can reap dividends because while doing this research, you may find that the model you're buying might not have the features you really need.

Let's take digital cameras, for example. While using a broad search at google using only the term digital camera might bring up thousands of hits, it might turn up other digital cameras that have additional features you haven't thought about while shopping. As an example, you probably will find a site that lists digital cameras, feature-by-feature, giving you a better idea of what you need to look for in a camera.

Among those hits, too, could be information that can save you money in other ways. A good example is a modem, a device that hooks up to a telephone line to connect to the Internet. Most computers come with what's called a "soft modem," meaning it uses the computer's computing power rather than its own.

Although this might sound good, it's actually bad because these modems are cheap, cheap, cheap. If you're on a poor telephone line, you might want to get a "real" hardware modem so you can have a better chance at higher-speed connections. By reading the information you get on modems, you could learn that a hardware modem is more expensive but in the long run, will offer considerably better performance.

Sometimes buying higher quality pays dividends.

This also brings up another way you can use the Internet besides buying goods: reviews.

We all know the old saying about everyone having an opinion but on the Internet you can always find opinions and reviews of products. Despite everyone thinking the Internet is all about technology, the truth is that you can find information about every product known to man, including cars, furniture -- you name it.

The two sites mentioned above can help you find reviews of nearly every product or real time opinions about products. Remember, though, that you must weigh the opinions, reading several before making up your mind. There will be some fervent opinions on both sides.

To produce some of these, just type in the name of the product and the word review afterwards. For example, type in Ford Taurus reviews and hit search. Do this in each of the search engines to get not only reviews written by professionals but reviews written by "real people" who don't normally write for a living. Quite often, the real people reviews give you more information than the professional ones.

You don't always have to buy on the Internet to reap its benefits. Browse, search, research; all of them can make your life more interesting -- and safer.

There is no restriction against any non-profit group using this article as long as it is kept in context with proper credit given the author. The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups (APCUG), an international organization of which this group is a member, brings this article to you.

Charlie Paschal, Editor/Publisher, Palmetto Personal Computer Club, Columbia, SC
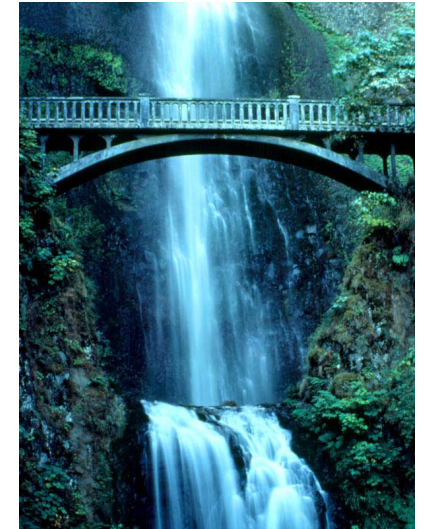


Photo courtesy of member Ray Santana

# Getting to Know Google

These days, whether you consciously choose it or not, your Web search engine is probably Google (http://www.google.com). That's because most search sites, whether they admit it or not, are powered by Google. And, why not? Google rose to the top of the search engines because its formula provided more relevant search results than any other. Also, its deceptively simple page makes it fast and easy to use.

I say deceptively simple because, underneath that friendly, colorful logo is a powerful search system that can accept queries as complex as you want to make them. Many people don't realize that if they do not find what they want on the first try, there are techniques they can use to improve their results. There are also ways to search Google that are more appropriate for certain specialty queries. And, Google is hiding a few extras that take it beyond a search engine into an amazing reference tool.

Let's start with an example. We're cooking dinner tonight, and we need a recipe for spaghetti sauce that does not use sugar. We might go to Google and type in this:

no sugar spaghetti sauce recipe

Google tells us we have about 56,000 results to wade through. A daunting task, considering the first page doesn't seem to contain anything relevant. The first thing we will try is grouping our search terms into phrases, using double-quotes. This tells Google that certain words should be searched for together. So, we try this:

"no sugar" "spaghetti sauce" recipe

That certainly narrowed things down, didn't it? This is a good technique to use when your search contains a lot of common words that could appear together in different contexts than what you are looking for. Unfortunately in this case, our first page of results is still not as relevant as we would like. The next thing we will try is searching for pages that do not contain a certain term:

-sugar "spaghetti sauce" recipe

This tells Google that we want pages that are about "spaghetti sauce" recipe, but specifically do not contain the term sugar. That seems to have done it—our first page of results is chock full of spaghetti sauce recipes that don't use sugar. "Subtracting" a term can also be useful when what you are searching for has multiple meanings. For example, if you are researching the "Holy Grail," you might want to add

"-Python" to your search to eliminate all the references to the movie Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

Now, maybe spaghetti sauce is too specific—we might want to also consider marinara sauce. In that case, we use Google's or syntax:

-sugar "(spaghetti | marinara) sauce" recipe

When there are multiple words that will satisfy our search, we can group them with parentheses and separate them with the "pipe" character—a vertical line that is most likely on the right-hand side of your keyboard. Google will then search for references to "spaghetti sauce" or "marinara sauce."

At this point, we've become so intrigued by what we can find with Google, we've completely forgotten about dinner. Now we are interested in just how many different chicken casserole recipes we can find. Here's one way:

"chicken * casserole" recipe

Notice the asterisk. This is called a wildcard. It tells Google that we don't care what word comes between chicken and casserole, but there should be something there. This can be particularly useful when you know most of a title of something, but are unsure of all the words. This particular search brings back all kinds of chicken casserole recipes. Something

# Getting to Know Google (Continued)

tells me we better just eat out tonight.

Besides its standard Web search, Google has many specialty searches that are triggered either by a keyword or simply by what you are searching for. For example:

site:microsoft.com "Internet Explorer" patches

This searches for references to "Internet Explorer" patches on microsoft.com only. If your favorite Web site does not offer a search function, this is a pretty good substitute.

Maybe we want to know which sites on the Web link to the OKC PC User's Group Web site:

link:okcpcug.org

We can also tell Google that what we are looking for is in an Adobe Acrobat PDF file:

filetype:pdf refrigerator manual

Google pays attention to what you are searching for, and offers helpful services based on what it thinks you want. For example, have you ever noticed Google shows your search words in the blue bar above your results? The search terms that are underlined link to a definition of that word at dictionary.com. If you spell a word wrong, Google will prompt you with the correct spelling and ask if you would like to search for that instead.

Google has many tricks like this up its sleeves. Search for a phone number, and Google will do a reverse lookup on the number. Search for a name with a city and state and/or zip code, and Google will look up their phone number. Search for an address and you will get links to maps of that location. Include a zip code with your search terms, and Google will offer you local results—Web sites for locations near the zip code, ordered by distance. You can even type in a shipment tracking number, and Google will figure out who the shipping company is and give you a link to the tracking information.

Google offers some services that have nothing to do with searching. Try this:

68.12 + (68.12 * .2)

The Google calculator will return the result of this computation. Fun, although, admittedly, not particularly useful. The Google calculator can be useful though, for things like conversions:

68mm = ? inches

You can do all kinds of conversions using Google—a handy tool whenever you get around to making that spaghetti sauce.

Google is much more useful than most people realize—we've only scratched the surface of what Google can do. If you are interested in more, check out Hacking Google by Tara Calishain and Rael Dornfest. It includes many more search tips, and information for programmers who want to include Google search results in their applications. As you explore what Google can do, you will probably discover that Google feels like more than just a Web site.

In fact, Google is your friend.

Billy Mabray and his wife, Angela, own Smart Goat, a local software development and web design business. They are members of the OKCPCUG. Comments or questions on the article are welcome and can be addressed to: billy@smartgoat.com.

There is no restriction against any non-profit group using this article as long as it is kept in context with proper credit given the author. The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups (APCUG), an international organization of which this group is a member, brings this article to you.

by *Billy Mabray,* Oklahoma City PC Users Group

# President's Corner

This month, we will hold our first workgroup meeting. This is your direct opportunity to customize your home workgroup to your own personal needs. Thus far it appears we will start with the following workgroups: novice, digital imaging, general, and progressive.

We will initially be slim on equipment and will depend on each other to temporarily fill the gaps. Each group will determine its equipment needs and the board will address how to raise the funds to secure what is needed or to seek additional club donations. We will have our normal PC/projector set up, and and some older PCs initially. Any PC donations would be appreciated.

Since each workgroup will be empowered to select its own agenda, and whether to have a permanent coordinator or rotate presentations amongst its members. The initial meeting will be the most critical hurdle so please be prepared to sound off and let us know how you would like this part of the club to run.

Since this will be your workgroup, be prepared to share your experience and knowledge with the five or six other people who may be in your group. Depending on demand and popularity, some work groups may be dissolved and replaced by more popular ones, or the initial workgroup agenda changed. We have no template to follow here, we are cutting a new course and we are bound to make some mistakes, so please be patient as we find the best way to get organized.

I believe the novice work group, which should encompass beginners and those wishing to brush up on fundamentals, to be the largest and most active. It will be the key workgroup in the club, probably handling newcomers until they are ready to join one of the other groups, or those who just wish to review the fundamentals.

The general work group will most likely cover a wide range of FAQs concerning PC hardware and software. It may be the second most popular workgroup.

The progressive work group will most likely cover advanced and non conventional use of PCs. Its members will probably be very comfortable with all areas of PC operation and their interest will probably be in advanced and challenging uses of PC technology.

The digital imaging group will serve as a special interest group (SIG) and delve into aspects related to digital imaging, and related fields.

I have asked some board members to start the initial workgroup meetings until each group can select its coordinator or determine how it will handle its presentations. After the workgroup has formed, future topics and meeting procedures discussed, the coordinator should let me know what the next workgroup topic will be. Each work group topic will be published on the website and in the newsletter. Members will have the opportunity to visit other workgroups with appropriate coordination.

I am still looking for organizational ideas, but right now we need some help with the kick off meeting. You don't

have to be an expert to help. This is a cooperative venture designed to provide a forum for interactive learning and participation. Workgroups may meet every two or three months, so their isn't a massive amount of work involved. Our club program chairman may be able to get some programs in a box to supplement workgroup demonstrations.

Most everyone has experience in some PC area. Please contact me at your earliest opportunity if your are willing to help with our May meeting. This is your club and your opportunity to have more fun and learn more. If you have any other ideas concerning how we can make our meetings better, please let me know. Our "members only" section is operational on the website and you will be given your password at the May meeting. You will then be able to contact others in your group and share your interests as appropriate.

Lets step into the future and have a great May Meeting

*Bob*