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## Vertical search-engines

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#### Topic-specific search-engines hope to challenge Google, at least in some areas

ARE you a generalist or a specialist? The question can be asked of people, but it is increasingly being asked about internet search-engines, as specialist or "vertical" sites take on generalists such as Yahoo! and Google. Some are already prospering: [GlobalSpec.com](http://GlobalSpec.com), for example, a profitable search-engine for engineers, has 3.5m registered users and signs up another 20,000 each week. "They own that market," says Charlene Li of Forrester, a consultancy.

This is due in large part to GlobalSpec's definable customer base. Its knowledge about the needs of its users sets it apart from the generalist search-engines, says Angela Hribar of GlobalSpec. Vertical sites, which serve up search results from a carefully selected group of topic-specific websites, can also target advertising at particular audiences more precisely.

One promising area for vertical sites is health-related search, which provides a microcosm of the threats and opportunities facing specialists. At stake are the online advertising budgets of the pharmaceutical and health-care giants, which are expected to spend \$1.4 billion on online advertising in America alone next year, up from \$625m in 2005. According to Jupiter, a consultancy, nearly a quarter of American internet users say the web is essential to taking care of their health. "The market opportunity for health-search is very large and growing," says Alain Rappaport, the boss and founder of [Medstory](http://Medstory), a health-search site based in Foster City, California.

Health is a field where consumers do seem prepared to seek out specialist sites that provide more relevant results. According to a new study from Jupiter, to be published on July 16th, 65% of health-search users believe that relevance is the most important criterion when deciding whether to click on a particular result; only 16% rate the trustworthiness of the source as most important. In short, relevance is king, says Monique Levy of Jupiter, which suggests that a vertical search-engine that successfully pairs a broad target market with a complicated topic can do well.

But that will mean getting consumers to kick their existing search habits. A study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, a non-profit research group, found that two-thirds of Americans researching health-related topics online started with a general search-engine. Only 27% went on to a medical site of any kind, let alone a health-search site. "The path to general search engines is well-worn and familiar," says Susannah Fox of Pew. "Dr Google is the de facto second opinion in this country."

Even so, there are signs that consumers are warming to the special features that specialist search-engines offer. [Healthline](http://Healthline), a health-search site with a "symptom search" function, saw its number

of unique monthly visitors increase nearly sevenfold during 2006 to around 2.5m. Some sites, such as [Healia](#), can limit results to those written at a “basic reading” level. Others, such as [Mamma Health](#), limit results to pre-screened medical sources. The same sorts of ideas are also being applied in other vertical-search fields.

At the same time, however, similar features and filters are appearing on generalist search-engines, enabling them to act more like vertical engines. Search for “achondroplasia” at Google or Yahoo!, for example, and you will be steered towards results sorted under the headings of treatments, causes, research and so on.

All of which suggests three possible fates for vertical-search sites. The strongest may be successful enough to dominate specific categories. The weakest may be picked off by pseudo-specialist features added to generalist search-engines. And there is a third way, namely for specialist sites to be offered under a bigger brand's umbrella. Last month Meredith, an American publisher of magazines such as *Fitness* and *Parents*, bought Healia. And Microsoft, which lags behind Google and Yahoo! in generalist search, hopes to use vertical search to fight back. It has bought several vertical sites in recent months—including Medstory in February. Health-search sites suggest a similar prognosis for specialist sites in other fields.