

SEARCHING FOR A SIX-LETTER ALTERNATIVE

BETTER THAN GOOGLE? DAVID MAIDA FINDS A SEARCH ENGINE WITH A DIFFERENCE - ONE THAT'S DESIGNED SPECIFICALLY FOR KIWI CONDITIONS.

Dave Andrews would have us do the unthinkable: kick our Google habit.

That's right. Give up Googling!

Now, I know what you're thinking. He's a letter short of a keyword – maybe. I don't know.

What I do know, however, is that he's not some disgruntled ex-employee or even a subversive Yahoo! supporter. No. He just thinks he's come up with something better.

"Google's rankings are mostly determined by how many other websites are linked to a particular site," he explained. "For obscure New Zealand websites, that may see them ranked at the bottom of the Google list."

Yes, come to think of it, he does have a point.

So, like any good search-engine developer would, Andrews set about trying to build a better one designed specifically for Kiwi conditions. The result is linknz.co.nz. He readily admits it's a

work in progress but if you're looking for a specific New Zealand website, linknz is your man – or, in this case, search engine.

"I wanted everyone to get a fair crack of the whip," he said. "Bed and breakfasts and small hotels can't spend their time developing traditional search-engine-friendly Web pages.

"The top search terms from linknz and Google are entirely different. It's about finding sites off the beaten track."

And so far, so good. The site currently receives about 220,000 hits a day (50,000

from overseas surfers) and that number is growing about eight per cent a day.

From a back room in his house in Levin, Andrews developed the site using programming languages PHP and C++. He spent five to six months writing the code for four 'spiders' to locate various Web pages based on search terms, and estimates that 131,000 domains with 16.7 million pages have already been indexed.

The site has filters to stop porn and adult content being indexed, so it can be classed as child-safe for searching the Web. He's also constantly modifying some 37 algorithms to perfect the way pages are ranked.

"From scratch, it was quite a task," he said.

I'll say. And certainly not the sort of feat you might expect from an ex-fireman.

Before moving to New Zealand six years ago, Andrews spent 18 years in the London Fire Service. He then set up a small computer company where he began building computers and writing programs.

"When the Internet came around, I started writing various pieces of software – games mostly. I guess I'm pretty good with numbers. I look at a page of numbers and find the sequences, which is what a search engine does."

Linknz works by breaking words down into syllables and querying the database.

"Three letters put together means a new keyword. It's learning the Maori language and recognises all the characters. It does about a trillion calculations per second."

The real test, however, is this: would you use it? Give it a try.

I found the search results are comparable, with the intended website coming up on the first or second page on all three engines. It's as fast or even faster than searchnz.co.nz and Google. However, if you do an exact phrase search, then

linknz cannot divide the word into syllables and it slows right down.

The site's "did you mean?" feature is handy if you've typed something in wrong as it suggests a correction. It does sometimes list multiple pages from the same domain as separate hits or delivers a hit with no link. Its maker explains that those are sites which he has not yet personally vetted.

"Search engines should take a bit of responsibility. You have to check to make sure the graphics are not porn."

Besides being free from adult content, the site is also free from advertising, for the moment.

"I don't wish to endorse company products," explained Andrews. "Google's sponsored links detract from what the search engine is there for."

Currently, sites are indexed for free. Any time the search engine comes up blank, it spiders for the site and makes a note to index it.

Andrews has spent a couple of thousand dollars of his own money setting up linknz and leasing server space for the next five years. His goal is to develop the 'perfect' search engine for New Zealand and a few other countries; Australia and South Africa are next in his sights. For now, linknz remains just a hobby – and, unexpectedly, something of a learning exercise.

"If you look at the news, the site is like a social pointer. If you're watching TV and an actor's name comes up, you can just watch those queries come in." ■

[DAVID MAIDA IS A FREELANCE WRITER LIVING IN AUCKLAND]