

The fifty most popular genealogy Web sites

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The interest in genealogy on the Internet dates back about fifteen years. Prominent link lists, such as [Cyndi's List](#) now identify about 300,000 links to Web pages of interest to genealogists (as of March 2008). That interest seems to be growing. Although subscription sites have existed for more than ten years ([Ancestry.com](#) was launched in 1997), the number has grown in recent years.¹ Social networking on the Internet, often dubbed “Web 2.0” has come to genealogy as well, with several new social sites launched in the past two years.²

Clearly, interest in genealogy on the Web continues unabated. Aggressive marketing by Ancestry and other commercial Web sites will encourage others with a latent interest in genealogy to begin pursuing their family history via the Web.³ As genealogy becomes more and more popular and Web sites continue to proliferate, the ever increasingly important question becomes: What are the most popular genealogy Web sites?

Link lists touting “important” or “favorite” or “best” genealogy Web site abound.⁴ Some focus on specific kinds of genealogy sites, but they are almost all the product of one person or one organization's opinion. While each person's opinion may have value, such lists often do not meet the needs of other researchers. On the other hand, Web sites that are visited by many genealogists would, apparently, be of value to many more, if they were only known to greater numbers of researchers.

It is now possible to determine which Web sites are the most popular, and sharing that information will allow more researchers to learn about sites their fellow genealogists have found helpful. There are a growing number of Web sites devoted to measuring and ranking Internet sites, a process that is part of “Web site analytics.” The growth of Internet marketing requires successful Web sites to understand their audiences as well as their competition and, in true capitalistic fashion, other Web entrepreneurs are only too happy to help. Using various statistics, primarily traffic rankings determined by such monitoring Web sites, the relative popularity of genealogy Web sites now becomes clear and is the focus of a recent study explained here.

Study approach

Four of the companies that provide Web site analytics (and associated metrics) make their rankings of Web sites available to the public. Many other such companies only provide their findings to their clients and may only track selected sites in order to track market segments, not all sites. Each of these companies uses different methods to rank, literally, millions of Web sites, including hundreds of true genealogy Web sites. Typically their rankings are based on some combination of the number of visitors, number of pages visited, and the time spent on a Web site. Their resulting lists vary, due to the differences in how, and what, they measure, but typically major sites such as Yahoo, MSN, and Google are near the top. Each company ranks sites from number one through more than a million in terms of the company's definition of popularity. Their specific ranking methodology is proprietary, but each site makes a vague comment or two on their Web sites about their approach. It also appears that two of

Metrics services

The four commercial Web site metrics services used for this study, with a brief statement of how they develop their rankings, are:

- Alexa.com, which has a global focus and its “traffic rank is based on three months of aggregated historical traffic data from millions of Alexa Toolbar users and is a combined measure of page views and users (reach).”
- Compete.com “ranks the top one million Web sites in the U.S. based on the number of people the domain attracts each month.”
- Quantcast.com uses “a panel of several million people who anonymously share their Web usage history.” They then use statistical techniques to “project which sites the rest of the U.S. Web audience is visiting.”
- Ranking.com globally “tracks over 215,000 ‘Net surfers with our market research software (hundreds of participants are added daily) as they visit various Web sites during the previous month.”

these sites seek to rank sites based on worldwide usage, while the other two focus on U.S. sites.

The specific ranking of any given Web site will vary, often considerably, between these four metrics companies. Furthermore, their rankings are done over a specific unit of time, generally one or three months. Naturally, rankings will vary over time given the fluid nature of the Internet as well as marketing efforts by different Web sites.

For each of the four separate ranking systems, it is possible to determine their overall (Internet-wide) rank for each site of genealogical interest, and then assign a “genealogical” ranking to such sites. For example, if site A had an overall ranking of 6,598, site B had a ranking of 34,682, and site C had a ranking of 12,649, then the respective genealogical ranking of those three sites would be 1) A, 2) C, and 3) B. However, a different ranking organization may have their respective ranking as 1) B, 2) A, and 3) C.

By using four separate ranking systems, the differences between the ways they are ranked are minimized. Sites that all four companies rank high will remain high in the final ranking, while those that are unevenly ranked will be “evened out.” For example, if a genealogical Web site has four separate genealogical rankings of 67, 35, 12, and 22 those rankings are averaged (totaled and divided by four) to a value of 34. The genealogical sites are then “re-ordered” based on their average value and then given an overall “genealogy” rank.

Selecting sites to rank

Some key aspects of Web sites must be considered in this ranking. First, it is important to note that these “ranking” Web sites do not rank specific pages; rather, they rank the entire site. Therefore, sites with some genealogical value, but that have a focus outside of typical genealogical usage, are not considered “genealogical” Web sites.

Second, the ranking determined by these four Web metrics companies is based on the high-level URL of each site. Most do not rank sub-domains or sub-folders.⁵ Hence, a Web site created and managed by an individual on a personal Geocities, Earthlink, AT&T, or similar ISP Web site cannot qualify for a genealogical ranking, since only the primary URL would be ranked.

The next task was to develop a list of true, “rankable” genealogical Web sites. Some sites, such as Cyndi’s List, are excellent link lists, but do not serve this purpose. Link lists provide links to thousands of Web pages and often many pages from the same site appear in different places on the lists. Also, many are hosted by non-genealogical domains. There are, however, several sources that do provide a list of genealogical Web sites. The first source, interestingly enough, is the metrics companies themselves. Three of them categorize many, but not all, of the sites they rank and genealogy is one of the categories. Therefore, Alexa provides a list of what it claims to be the top one hundred genealogy Web sites. Ranking.com provides a similar list (dispersed through several sub-categories). At Quantcast, on the ranking page for each site, it identifies twenty sites it deems to be “similar.” For genealogical sites, these twenty are almost always other genealogy sites.

Therefore, those “judged as genealogy” sites are the beginning of a list of true genealogy sites, but they are not enough. Some clearly genealogical sites, such as [Genealogy Today](#), do not appear in the genealogical category (in Alexa). Furthermore, the metrics companies sometimes categorize a site as “genealogical” when most family history researchers would not. For example, sites that discuss the meaning of surnames, or what to name the baby, are categorized as “genealogy” sites in some lists (notably at Alexa).

Other lists of genealogical sites were added to this list. They included sites in the Google and Yahoo Internet directories under their various genealogy categories, as well as two online link lists that focus primarily on genealogy Web sites, not just Web pages: Kip Sperry’s list of “[Family History Internet Sites](#)” and the [Genealogy Sleuth](#) page. Kip Sperry is a genealogy and family history professor at Brigham Young University whose alphabetical list of Web sites is mostly “full-fledged” genealogy sites, although a few are just Web pages at another site.

The key criteria for including a Web site on the list included:

- Content specific to genealogy, whether free or fee-based sites
- Content primarily of interest to genealogists, even if others might use it also, such as Ellis Island
- Multiple sites from the same owner(s) were permitted, as long as the URLs and content were different
- “Mirror” sites (different URL but the same content) are only counted once at the highest ranking
- Sites must be listed in at least three of the four ranking services

Eventually this process identified almost three hundred separate Web sites, deemed to be of significant genealogical interest, to add to the ranking list. Upon closer examination, several sites proved to be not just genealogical; rather they had significant other content that would draw many non-genealogists, thus “inflating” their ranking. Others were removed because of their high-level URL being shared by many other sites.

Sites deemed not to be true “genealogy” sites included:

- General sites, such as Google or Yahoo
- Reference sites, such as Wikipedia or map and gazetteer sites
- Broad research sites used by non-genealogists as well, such as newspaper sites
- Individual sites that are part of a large consortium, such as the state or county GenWeb sites (most are not hosted on their own URL, so they can’t be ranked with other genealogy sites)
- Coat-of-arms and most royalty sites
- “People finding” or reunion sites used by private investigators and others
- Broad interest sites used by genealogists and others, such as those used for ordering vital records



Audience Also Likes

The people who visit ancestry.com are also likely to visit these categories and sites:

Family/Genealogy

rootsweb.com	55.8x
cyndislist.com	51.1x
kindredconnections.com	50.4x
interment.net	49.8x

Directories/Search/Guide

freerecordsregistry.com	12.3x
searchsystems.net	11.3x
netsleuth.com	8.4x
intelius.com	5.9x

Nonprofit

The Library of Congress	7.9x
gutenberg.org	6.1x
Internet Archive	5.4x
National Public Radio	3.5x

Audience Also Visits

The people who visit ancestry.com are also likely to visit:

usgenweb.org	58.6x
census-online.com	56.4x
rootsweb.com	55.8x
familyhistory.com	55.1x
us-census.org	55.0x
usgwcensus.org	54.7x
usgwtombstones.org	54.5x
txgenweb.org	54.2x
genealogy.org	51.9x
idreamof.com	51.8x
cyndislist.com	51.1x
ancestralfindings.com	51.1x
kygenweb.net	51.0x
usgwarchives.org	50.8x
ilgenweb.net	50.7x

- Government sites where only a few pages were of genealogical interest (such as Illinois marriages at the Secretary of State's site)
- “Shill” or decoy sites, whose only purpose is to link users to one other specific site (i.e.: FamilyHistory.com is, in this sense, an Ancestry.com shill site)
- Family Web sites

The list could have been expanded by several hundred, if smaller sites were included, such as sites for every genealogical society, software producer, or professional genealogist. However, a review of the rankings for such sites shows that they fall far below the threshold for even the top 150 or 200 sites. Ultimately, this process netted more than 220 major “true” genealogical Web sites.

Observations about the findings

A careful review of the fifty most popular sites reveals some interesting facts:

- Nine of the fifty sites are subscription sites. This seems to suggest that genealogists realize the value of information, and that it may be necessary to pay for it.
- Half of the lists are primarily sites that provide genealogical data.
- Nine of the sites have electronic family trees available, which share the findings of other genealogists.
- Four of the sites are what are sometimes called “Web 2.0” sites—community sites where people can share their genealogical information with family and others.
- Cemetery and census data are the most popular kinds of online data, with three separate sites for each of those kinds of records.
- Internet genealogy continues to attract new participants; several of the Web sites were less than two years old.
- There will surely be some sites on the list that a researcher has not seen, or even heard of before; it's fascinating to learn what others find useful.

Limitations of the method

Because this ranking is based on an average of four separate ranking systems, the results will surprise many, including some webmasters. A site may have high traffic, as measured by an owner's internal statistics, but that may not equate to popularity on all of the rankings from the Web metrics companies. For example, Bill Cribs is the owner of [Obituary Central](#), one of the sites in the most popular fifty. However, he reports that his other site, [GenealogyBuff](#), gets much more traffic. Apparently, however, some of the metrics companies do not measure traffic the way he does. An average of the four genealogical rankings for GenealogyBuff would put that site at about seventy-fifth place among all the genealogy sites ranked.

Some companies determine their rankings, in part, from unique visitors, number of pages visited,

or how long people stay at the site. Such aspects are not reflected directly in the sheer number of visitors.

Other Web sites may be popular, but not be reflected in the rankings for other reasons. The rankings are based on a snapshot in time, and the Web site may not have been as popular during the time the rankings were determined. Generally the companies use a kind of “rolling” survey and compile their data by month (or may display the last three months). Perhaps a site is more popular at a different time of the year. The current findings are based on rankings published for the month of February.



Some Web sites make their information available to users who don't have to go to the Web site at all (which would decrease a ranking based on traffic or site visits). Sites that deliver information through RSS feeds, for example, may have many loyal readers who seldom ever visit the Web site. Blogs and podcasts with content that can be downloaded from iTunes or other sources are also likely under-represented when measuring Web site popularity.⁶

Some may argue that subscription Web sites have an unfair advantage; people return to them regularly because they have to justify their own financial commitment. Or, those sites have more money to advertise and thereby attract more traffic. Or, they get more traffic because they are accessed through libraries. That may be true, but they still need to provide information that a significant number of people want in order to have traffic. Two well-known subscription sites—Godfrey.org and Accessible.com—barely made the top two hundred.

It's true; the current system is not perfect. There may be some apples and oranges that are being compared among the Web sites, but it appears that the comparison is, at least, all “fruit.” This study does not try to compare, say, cars to dogs. It's also sad that some important sites can't be ranked because of the nature of the site. Sites such as Joe Beine's [German Roots](http://GermanRoots) might well be a top fifty site, but it essentially does not have its own URL.⁷

Bubbling under the top fifty

Billboard's music charts often feature songs that have not yet made its top forty. Readers may be interested in some well-known sites that did not make it into the 2008 top fifty. They include (with ranking—\$ denotes subscription site):

- [Olive Tree Genealogy](http://OliveTreeGenealogy) (54)
- [I Dream of Genealogy](http://IDreamofGenealogy) (60)
- [Origins Network](http://OriginsNetwork) \$ (61)
- [Legacy Family Tree](http://LegacyFamilyTree) (65)
- ScotlandsPeople \$ (66)
- DAR (67)
- FreeBMD (71)



Notes

1. Since 2006, new subscription sites have included [WorldVitalRecords](#), [GenealogyBank](#), and [Footnote](#).
2. New genealogy networking sites include [MyHeritage](#), [FamilyLink](#), [Geni](#), and [WeRelate](#).
3. Tim Sullivan, CEO of The Generations Network, parent company of Ancestry, explained this phenomenon at the BYU Computer Genealogy Conference in Provo, Utah, on 14 March 2008. He indicated that this is one purpose of Ancestry marketing.
4. *Family Tree Magazine* has been publishing its editorial staff's opinion of the "101 Best Genealogy Sites" on an annual basis since 2001.
5. Quantcast.com does rank sub-domains separate from the primary domain name.
6. Persons interested in the popularity of blogs may want to check out [Technorati.com](#), which has found some ways to indicate the relative popularity of blogs.
7. [German Roots](#)—Although there is a URL at <http://www.germanroots.com>, it redirects to the AT&T site, which is what most link lists have bookmarked, so the traffic is virtually non-existent for GermanRoots.com.

- [Eastman's Online Genealogy Newsletter](#) (74)
- [Webpages by Steven P. Morse](#) (76)
- [New England Ancestors](#) (87)

Three sites focusing on passenger lists suggest that that topic is next behind census and cemetery as a popular record type on the Web. The sites are [Immigrant Ships](#) (51), [TheShipsList](#) (70) and [CastleGarden](#) (104).

However, rankings beyond the top fifty should not be deemed as reliable for two reasons. First, sites with lower overall rankings are considered less accurate by the Web metrics companies themselves. Second, some obscure, yet still popular, sites may have been overlooked in the compilation of the original list of "genealogy Web sites" and the further down the list, the greater the chance that an overlooked site would appear.

'Un-rankable' genealogy sites

The limitation of the current method of determining rankings does leave some important sites out of the list all together. Some of the following sites would likely appear in the top fifty if they could be ranked equally:

- [About Genealogy](#) (a sub-domain of [About.com](#))
- [Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System](#) (sub-domain of the [National Parks Service](#))
- [GenForum](#) (sub-domain of [Genealogy.com](#))
- [General Land Office's Land Patents](#) (sub-domain of [Bureau of Land Management](#))
- [Legacy.com](#) (not just genealogical; primarily a place for memorials for recently deceased persons)
- [U.S. National Archives](#), [Library of Congress](#), [WorldCat](#), etc. (significant non-genealogical data) **DG**

The top fifty

The following table shows the top fifty most popular genealogy Web sites, along with their genealogical ranking in the four contributing ranking companies. The ranking used is that posted on the four Web ranking companies during February 2008. Plans are to update this list annually. Subscription sites are shown with \$. Webmasters are invited to nominate their Web sites. It is possible to review a Web site's ranking in the four ranking services. For a site to place in the top 100, it should have a page ranking above the following thresholds for the indicated ranking services:

Alexa: 950,000

Compete: 100,000

Quantcast: 70,000

Ranking: 150,000

An online version of this list, with live links, is available on the [ProGenealogists](#) Web site.

Rank	Genealogy Web Site	Average Genealogy Rank	Genealogical Ranking			
			Alexa	Compete	Quantcast	Ranking
1	Ancestry.com \$	1.5	2	2	2	1
2	RootsWeb.com	1.5	3	1	1	2
3	MyHeritage.com	4.5	1	7	7	3
4	Genealogy.com \$	4.75	9	3	3	4
5	FamilySearch.org	6.25	8	6	5	6
5	MyFamily.com	6.25	5	5	8	7
7	FindAGrave.com	8.25	11	8	4	10
8	Footnote.com \$	12	13	4	6	25
9	OneGreatFamily.com \$	14.25	22	11	11	13
10	WorldVitalRecords.com \$	14.5	16	10	10	22
11	AncestorHunt.com	15	33	9	9	9
11	GenealogyToday.com	15	12	12	12	24
13	AccessGenealogy.com	18	30	14	14	14
14	EllisIsland.org	19	17	19	19	21
15	CyndisList.com	19.75	28	16	17	18
16	Interment.net	21.5	32	13	13	28
17	Geni.com	22.5	7	20	31	32
18	USGennet.org	23	43	15	15	19
19	KindredKonnections.com \$	23.5	35	18	18	23
20	FamilyTreeMaker.com	25.5	40	24	23	15
21	SearchForAncestors.com	26.75	34	22	22	29
21	DistantCousin.com	26.75	38	17	16	36
23	CousinConnect.com	27.5	39	21	20	30
24	GeneBase.com	31.25	15	35	32	43
25	TribalPages.com	31.75	20	38	49	20



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Rank	Genealogy Web Site	Average Genealogy Rank	Genealogical Ranking			
			Alexa	Compete	Quantcast	Ranking
26	SurnameWeb.org	32.75	44	27	29	31
27	FamilyTreeDNA.com	33	25	30	42	35
28	JewishGen.org	34	19	40	39	38
29	ObitCentral.com	34.25	66	23	21	27
30	GenCircles.com	36.25	45	45	43	12
31	DeathIndexes.com	37.25	67	25	24	33
32	Genuki.org.uk	38	26	54	55	17
33	Daddezio.com	39.75	53	33	28	45
34	PoliticalGraveyard.com	40.75	49	31	27	56
35	Linkpendium.com	43.25	42	28	25	78
36	Geneanet.org	44.5	4	56	71	47
37	US-Census.org	46.25	75	34	30	46
38	AncientFaces.com	47	50	52	47	39
39	HeritageQuestOnline.com \$	50	52	29	34	85
40	CensusFinder.com	51	63	37	36	68
41	GenWed.com	51.75	80	36	33	58
41	GenealogyBank.com \$	51.75	46	41	40	80
43	GenealogyLinks.net	52	51	60	57	40
44	WorldRoots.com	53	27	67	70	48
44	ProGenealogists.com	53	64	53	46	49
46	Census-Online.com	53.5	82	32	35	65
47	FamilyTreeMagazine.com	54.5	55	51	51	61
48	KindredTrails.com	55.25	81	49	41	50
49	USGenWeb.com	57.25	73	44	48	64
50	FindMyPast.com \$	57.5	23	93	106	8