
A Brief History of Q&A Sites

Launched April 1997, Ask Jeeves was one of the first question-and-answer sites. Jeeves was the name of the butler pictured on the original site that fetched answers to question, which could be posed in conversational language or by using keyword searches.¹⁰² In later incarnations the Q&A site added support for math, dictionary, and conversion questions. In 2001 the name was shortened to Ask.com.¹⁰³ On September 23, 2005, the company announced Jeeves was going into retirement, and the character was removed from Ask.com on February 27, 2006.¹⁰⁴ On May 16, 2006, Ask.com introduced a “Binoculars Site Preview” into its search results so that users could use the “Binoculars” to get a sneak peek at search results pages.¹⁰⁵ In September 2010 Ask.com launched its mobile Q&A app for the iPhone, which brought the service to mobile users in an easy-use format.¹⁰⁶

Yahoo! Answers, launched July 5, 2005, lets users both pose questions and respond to questions submitted by other users.¹⁰⁷ The Q&A site accepts and answers queries in twelve languages and awards status points to encourage participation.¹⁰⁸ As of December 2006, Yahoo! Answers had already amassed 60 million registered users and a database of 65 million answers.¹⁰⁹

Answers.com was founded by Bill Gross and Henrik Jones at Idealab in May 1996, but it didn't launch its free Q&A site until January 2005.¹¹⁰ By August 2009 the site had 56.4 million unique monthly visitors in the United States and 83.0 million globally.¹¹¹ Bob Rosen-schein, CEO of Answers.com, announced that the site had reached 5.5 million registered users and its database of answers had topped 10 million as of November 2010.¹¹²

This social media category has long been controlled by high-traffic industry giants such as Yahoo! Answers and Answers.com, which each had nearly 50 million unique monthly visitors in December 2010, according to the analytics firm comScore.¹¹³ However, more recent players, like Quora, have reinvigorated this lethargic field with new innovations, such as celebrity experts and video questions and answers.¹¹⁴

Marketing with Q&A Sites

While Q&A sites are primarily intended to deliver information, they can also be an avenue for social media marketing. However, Q&A sites are not an appropriate place to promote a product (unless, by some amazing coincidence, the marketed product happens to be the answer to someone's question). Members of Q&A sites gain a reputation for providing detailed and useful answers.¹¹⁷ This process can be a natural way to demonstrate thought leadership and build trust in a brand through the knowledge of its spokespeople.

Sharing information through Q&A sites builds an aura of expertise, especially because many services provide points or rankings to members who provide the best

Review Sites

A **review site** is a service that lets people post opinions about brands, companies, products, and services. Starting in 1995 (one year after its launch), Amazon.com was one of the first sites to encourage reviews.¹¹⁵ By 2006 more stores were clamoring for the user input and valuable information that online product reviews could provide.¹¹⁶ Now most large retailers permit product and service reviews, including Walmart and Costco. In addition, there are dedicated review sites, such as Yelp or Epinions.com, and specialized review sites like RateMds.com for help finding a doctor or dentist. There are also membership services that compile and verify consumer ratings of local service companies and contractors, such as Angie's List. Finally, there are professional review sites, which either hire experts in specific fields to write reviews or use in-house staff to prepare reviews.

While product reviews are undeniably important in influencing consumer purchases, their role as a marketing tool is more tenuous. Most sites have explicit guidelines that bar overt marketing. Reviews are checked, either by human editors or computer algorithms, to detect manipulation of rating scores. The punishments can be harsh: On Yelp a business is permanently barred from being rated if it is found to have cheated the system. This banishment represents a serious loss of credibility for a firm. While a business can encourage past clients to go and write positive reviews, that is almost the full extent of possible marketing strategies on a review site. Valuable for their product feedback in addition to informing other customers, review sites are best when the results are completely organic. While review sites might be passively involved in a social media marketing strategy, companies should refrain from attempting to influence rating results because of the serious potential consequences.