Building Search Provider and Search Suggestion Extensions

IE 7 introduced a popular feature called Instant Search. This places a search box into the top-level browser chrome, enabling fast access to search without having to first navigate to the URL of a search engine.

In this chapter I discuss how you can easily build traditional search providers and visual search providers for your site or third-party services. I begin by discussing the OpenSearch specification, followed by the format and structure of search providers. I follow this up with a walkthrough of using OpenSearch to construct a basic search provider. Next up are visual search providers, where I discuss the process of building this enhanced extension for IE 8 and higher. I end the chapter with some guidelines and advanced topics, touching on issues such as user preferences and external installation options.

Understanding Search Providers

Search providers are a simple extension that provides a powerful search experience within the browser frame. IE completely manages the experience for users and developers, cutting down on development time and providing a consistent, predictable experience for end users (Figure 9–1).

The Inline Search box

The search box is located in the top-right corner of the browser, next to the address bar. This prominent location is easily accessible and allows a user to easily perform the common task of searching without having to directly access a provider first. Users can quickly focus on the box by pressing CTRL+L.

The Quick Pick menu, shown in Figure 9–2, allows users to quickly switch between search providers without having to leave the Inline Search area. When text is entered into the Inline Search box, the drop-down displays with icons referencing as many search providers as can fit in the given space. Clicking one of these icons will reroute a search query to the chosen search provider. The Find button brings up the page-search toolbar, allowing users to search content within the current page rather than sending a search query to a search engine.
Search providers may optionally support search suggestions. Search suggestions are proposed queries returned from a search provider as data is typed into the Instant Search box. Providers that implement this feature are sent the current contents of the Inline Search text box as a user types in a query. Providers may return result sets, which are shown in the drop-down above the Quick Pick menu. Figure 9–3 shows an example of search suggestions returned from the ESPN.com search provider; a query of “LeBron” returns four possible results for the query as typed.

Search suggestions can help to refine search queries before they’re executed, with the goal of cutting down the amount of time it takes for users to search a given topic (much like the inline autocomplete present on modern operating systems and Ajax-based web sites).

IE 8 introduces another form of search suggestion, called visual search suggestions. As the name implies, visual search suggestions return rich suggestions alongside text-based search suggestions. Figure 9–4 highlights the visual search suggestions for a query of Wikipedia with the term “Aleister.”