

AltaVista. What's That?

By NICK BILTON

There's an alternate universe where someone would ask you a question you don't know the answer to and you would respond, "I don't know, why don't you AltaVista it?" Instead, in the real world, you reply, "Why don't you Google it?"



AltaVista, once the most advanced and comprehensive search engine on the Web, is just days away from its last breath.

Yes, like you, I thought AltaVista had been extinguished years ago, but apparently not.

Last week, Jay Rossiter, executive vice president of platforms at Yahoo, which owns AltaVista, said that the search engine would be closed on July 8. Anyone who still uses AltaVista — I'm not sure who that is — should instead go to Yahoo Search, Mr. Rossiter said.

Readers who are 18 years old and younger will probably ask, "What's an AltaVista?" In short, it was one of the first and most successful search engines. It was founded in 1995 by Digital Equipment Corporation.

Since then, AltaVista has been through a number of confusing acquisitions. Digital Equipment Corporation was acquired by Compaq in 1998, which merged with Hewlett-Packard in May 2002. AltaVista itself was purchased in 2003 by Overture Services, then the leading seller of online search advertising. Overture, in turn, was purchased by Yahoo, once also a leader in search, in 2003.

Both Yahoo and AltaVista were decimated by Google, which was founded in 1998 and quickly became the biggest and most popular search engine in the world.

AltaVista didn't go down without a fight. In 2002, the company tried to reinvent itself, and as Wired wrote at the time, "AltaVista is out to prove that troubled Internet companies can have second acts." Wired said the company planned to battle Google by rolling "out a dramatic overhaul of its site and indexing methodology."

It didn't work. So 18 years after its birth, AltaVista is about to be laid to rest.

As the company approaches its final hours, entrepreneurs will look at the history books to find out what went wrong. Although there are likely many lessons to be learned — bad management and not innovating quickly enough — the end probably began in 2000, as the technology bubble started to go pop.

AltaVista was supposed to raise \$300 million in December 1999 in an initial public offering, but canceled the I.P.O. after the technology stock market started to implode.

In 1995, when AltaVista made its debut, the company said it was processing 2.5 million search requests a day. Today, Google, processes 5.1 billion searches each day.

It's a fascinating story from greatness to the end. If you want to learn more, you can always Google it.
