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Biznology Blog by Mike Moran

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In Search of...People You Know



Years ago, Leonard Nimoy, the actor who played Spock on the classic Star Trek series, hosted a TV show called *In Search of...*, where he explored a different subject each week. Today, we'll be looking at a different Spock, but one still in search of things—Spock.com, the people search engine. I had the chance to interview Jay Bhatti, Co-Founder and Vice President of Spock.com, and am happy to share his answers.

Me: How did Spock come about? Tell me more about your background and how you think it prepared you for what you are doing now.

JB: Spock was born after a meeting with a business school friend, and Spock co-founder Jaideep Singh. At the time, I was with Microsoft and Jaideep was at Clearstone Venture Capital.

Frustrated with how other search engines organized people, we felt there was a strong disconnect with the general Web, social networks such as MySpace and Facebook, and professional Web sites such as LinkedIn and Plaxo. We felt there was an emerging market with people search, so we got together and drew up Spock. As a product manager at Microsoft, I was able to work closely with the MSN managers and see firsthand how they approached search.

I was also fortunate enough to see how as a large corporation, Microsoft seemed to be misjudging the value of the search and how to succeed. The invaluable experience at Microsoft really taught me that you need to be constantly reinventing and finding ways to improve your product.

Me: Lots of people have been waiting for vertical search engines to succeed, but few have. What do you think will allow Spock to be successful?

JB: Search in general is a difficult space to dominate because of factors such as user intent, and the need for unique content. Spock's formula for success rests in our search technology. I believe that we've developed the most comprehensive people search on the Web and our engineers are working extremely hard to ensure that people not only find who they are looking for but that the information is also relevant.

While today's search market is still dominated by Google, nothing on the Internet is set in stone which is why people will be driven to the place with the best result.

Me: What do you see as the future of vertical search? Besides Spock, which search engines do you think will be successful, and why?

JB: I see the future of search becoming more and more segmented. If you take the example of a popular travel site like Kayak or an event-oriented site such as ZVents, these are specialized search engines that are able to successfully compete on a smaller level. What makes ZVents and other sites successful is that they combine a user friendly UI with solid results. Other sites I can see coming out on top include Amazon and TheFind for shopping and products, Seeqpod and Grooveshark for music and Truveo and Hulu for video.

Me: Do you think there is a game plan that vertical search engines should follow to be successful? Is there one to avoid?

JB: The most important things for any new search engine to focus on are good results supported by solid technology and a diverse business model in place. Having excellent technology is important in driving and keeping users to your site, while implementing a solid business model from the start ultimately helps in discovering the best ways to monetize your site. If you focus too heavily on your technology or your business model, you are likely to have trouble implementing the two.

Me: What's Spock's business model and how much progress have you made to profitability?

JB: Spock's business efforts thus far have focused on site advertising. By experimenting with various advertising models such as Click Per Action and Pay Per Click, we've made significant progress towards finding the right balance.

Me: When searchers are looking for people, what specific tasks are they doing and how does Spock help them?

JB: We've found that around 1/3 of all searches on the Internet are for people. These searches range from celebrities to business contacts from a person's Outlook account. Catering to people who want to easily find others, and would like to keep up to date on their contacts and favorite celebrities, Spock is a place that tries to provide as much information as possible. Spock helps people with this through two main ways, our search and results. With Spock, searching can be done by name, e-mail, or related keyword (an attribute such as an occupation, or university). Our results help others connect as we provide information such as pictures, related keywords, related people, and links to other places on the Web.

Me: What are the secrets behind Spock's ability to find people better than Google and other mainstream search engines do?

JB: Because Spock's search only focuses on data about people, our results are able to better facilitate people search. Our unique crawl collects meta data in a way that few other search engines can compete with.

Me: What do you see in the future for Spock? What's coming up that we should expect?

JB: Spock's future is extremely bright. As we work on crawling and indexing information on people across the Web we hope that our enthusiastic user base will

continue to promote our product. In terms of what's next for Spock, along with improving our search, I anticipate further development through partnerships and ad sales.

Me: What changes do you see coming in the search business? How is Spock positioned to respond to them?

JB: For the time being I see major search engines such as Google and Yahoo continuing to dominate the search market. However as vertical search engines such as Spock develop, I see them as being able to successfully compete for small but significant market share in search. This is because large engines such as Google must focus on search as a whole, while sites like Spock and ZVents can focus on very specific actions. By building the best possible product, Spock has strategically positioned itself for the future.

Me: Thanks so much, Jay, for sharing these thoughts with my readers.



Posted by MikeMoran at January 6, 2009 7:02 PM

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