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ADVANCED SEARCH

People Search Engines Take On LinkedIn

by Laurie Sullivan, Thursday, November 6, 2008, 9:18 PM

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People search engine Spock is working on a service that will give users access to public records stored in public databases across the Web.

The service, scheduled to launch mid-January, will have a \$1.99 monthly service fee. Subscribers will gain access to links and data mined from government and municipally databases such as mortgage brokers and courthouses, as well as social network pages at MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn.

The public records search tool is one in a series of paid services that the Redwood City, Calif.-based company plans to launch in the coming year. Earlier this month, it rolled out a service that scans Gmail accounts to locate friends across the Web.

Similar to the way Google Alerts track posts to the Web about celebrities, Spock's search tool builds alerts on friends based on their email address, aggregates the information, and sends the subscriber updates on Web locations and social networks used. Future plans will offer more premium services such as the ability to contact users through mutual friends, according to Jay Bhatti, Spock cofounder. "Sort of like LinkedIn," He said. "While they do it for professionals, we want to offer that service for anyone in the world."

It's the promise of what paid search services can deliver that's fueling the move by people search engines, according to Debra Aho Williamson, senior analyst at eMarketer. "When you're looking for information specifically about people, the easiest way to find it is through a people-specific search engine," she said. "They all have social aspects with aspirations of offering premium services similar to those see on LinkedIn, but can they deliver? Reunion, too, is trying to become more like a social network, as we have seen with the acquisition of Wink."

Reunion.com, Santa Monica, Calif.--which announced earlier this week that it would acquire Wink, a Mountain View, Calif.-based people search site--has plans to offer a host of new services when it emerges rebranded early next year.

The new company combines Wink's 700 million individual profiles and Web-crawling capabilities, and Reunion's 50 million members. Scheduled to unveil in February, the services will pull personal and professional information from sites like LinkedIn, MySpace, Facebook and Twitter, as well as public records. "We have a very similar LinkedIn-style business model," said Jeff Tinsley, Reunion CEO and founder. "New features being planned for the re-launch center on finding all the people you have known throughout your entire life across every single site."

Most services will remain free, but a handful of paid features will give consumers a little extra.

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Building the system means that engineers will rip out Reunion's core infrastructure and replace it with Wink's. Tinsley said Reunion did not have the Web-crawling technology that extracts people-specific information. "Wink's technology is sophisticated--something we would have never been able to build ourselves," he said, describing the engineers who built the system as "Google/Yahoo-like," some with Ph.D.s, "and we just couldn't have done it ourselves in-house. It would have taken years."

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