

MAIN

Spock offers an ambitious “people” search engine

October 31, 2006 | [Matt Marshall](#) | [View comments](#)[Comments](#)

Updated



Spock, a secretive Menlo Park start-up incubated with \$1 million from Clearstone Venture Partners, will unveil a search engine for people by the end of the year.

From a demo we've seen, we think it could be a powerful addition. Spock could take this in some interesting directions. Its main challenge will be to wean users from Google as a first step, though more on that in a sec.

When Spock launches, it will have 100 million profiles of people in its database, by far the largest open repository of profiles anywhere. Spock delivers a mixture of facts and research on a people, but also opens a profile to social input, giving it a touch of Wikipedia.

This move is a no-brainer, and it makes you wonder why no one has done this yet.

[LinkedIn](#), [ZoomInfo](#) and other people-contact related sites were built in different eras, and have focused on specific subsets of people (LinkedIn and ZoomInfo on business execs, for example). Spock, however, exploits all the latest tagging technology and the exploding number of public profiles on the Web since social network sites like MySpace became popular last year.

Scrubbing millions of profiles from the Web wasn't an obvious thing to do when Palo Alto's LinkedIn launched several years ago. LinkedIn began as a contact site, allowing people to request meetings through their layers of relationships. It has since tried to move toward a more open model. Indeed, LinkedIn is aggressively building out its people profiles even as we write. (Last week, it also kicked off a major expansion into Europe and Asia as part of a land-grab, with a German version to go live soon.)

Spock *starts* from the other end. Spock dispenses with the “contact” element of LinkedIn. It is an open site, for people seeking information about other people.

ZoomInfo, which you must pay a subscription for, has 29 million profiles. LinkedIn has about 9 million profiles, and wants to grow to 100 million by 2008. Spock's 100 million, meanwhile, will only grow, according to co-founders Jaideep Singh and Jay Bhatti.

If Google is a place to find Web sites that are relevant for your search, and Amazon is place to find goods, then Spock wants to let you find people, they argue.



Here's an example of how it works: If you type in “actress,” Spock returns results like Google — with listings down a page. In this case, the first entry is Felicity Huffman, who Spock's engine finds as the most relevant for “actress.” (Now, if you type in “actress” into Google, you'll see why Spock has a chance; there are [few actresses in the results](#), except for the annoying site [ActressArchives](#) at the top).

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Moreover, as both Spock and LinkedIn make their profiles more popular, these will rank higher in Google's results anyway.

Continuing with our "actress" example, you first get a photo of Huffman, but you also get a bunch of tags underneath telling you how she is relevant. For example, there's tag for "Oscar nominee for best actress," and "Desperate Housewives," for which she is well known. There's a "Wikipedia" tag. If you click on these tags, Spock will take you its relevant results for that tag. This gives users a way of searching for information related to the Huffman.

The tag font size gets smaller if Spock's engine detects the tag isn't relevant for the person. So if users create a "sexy" tag for Huffman, the tag may get larger or smaller, depending on how many people agree. Spock gives users an option of clicking on the tag and selecting "yes" or "no." If they select no, Spock factors this into its database. Then, if you type in "sexy actress," Huffman will have fallen slightly in the ranking. Spock has built ways to keep people from gaming the system. If you want to add tags, for example, you have register — one way for Spock to monitor usage.

Nicole Kidman is the second result under "actress," even though she won an Oscar (Huffman was only a nominee). Why would an engine rank a nominee higher than an actual winner? Chief executive Jaideep Singh says Spock's engine factors in hundreds of variables for its algorithm on determining relevance. This is Spock's secret sauce, he says. We asked if his algorithm takes advantage of Google's APIs. He said yes, but there are many other sources, he said.

Spock will make money by running relevant advertising beside the profile results.

Spock has seven employees in Menlo Park, two in India, and six more part-time.

Singh and Jay Bhatti met in business school. Bhatti has a background in consulting, having worked at Accenture, Deloitte and Microsoft. Singh was a VC at Clearstone and worked at WindRiver. Jeff Winner, VP of engineering hails from Friendster, eGroups and Netscape.

David Stern, the investor at Clearstone (who [contributed an op-ed to VentureBeat here](#)) said the investment is a return to his firm's roots as an investor in consumer companies — eToys, Overture, PayPal, United Online, MP3.com and eMusic are among them.

Next Story: [Stealth "people" search engine to launch with 100M profiles](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR, **Matt Marshall**

Matt Marshall is editor and CEO of VentureBeat. Follow him on Twitter at [@mmarshall](#), and follow VentureBeat on Twitter at [@venturebeat](#).

Dave McClure

Spock rocks. 'nuff said.

Greg Linden

Minor typo, the link to Zoominfo is broken. Should be [zoominfo.com](#), not [zoomfinfo.com](#).

Matt Marshall

thx, fixed.

BGP

It may work better than Google, that remains to be seen, but will it work better once the online marketers start gaming it? It's one thing to make a superior engine in a closed test environment.

Google surely could do many things better as well if they didn't have to constantly filter out the thousands of SEM's who game the results.

Tim

also a typo in the nicole kidman paragraph. she won, was not nominated.

Matt Marshall

Thanks Tim. Fixed.

Monica Zhang

This is good idea even in biz model. I found another website in Chinese market which is called [ucloo.com](#)

including 90 million personal data, which is doing something leading in China at people search engine. The difference is that Spock search by what the people wants to know, while UCLOO search by who the people knows.

Jack Campbell

Knover (<http://www.knover.com>) has already launched a cool people search site, but their site only has notable people.

HARRY

May the force be with you.

daniel

live long and search...sounds great, can't wait to see it.

D

KYLEIGH

Just wanted to comment on how much I enjoy reading your posts. Thanks!

Sarai

I think you have done an excellent job with your site. I will return in the near future.

Deborah

Hi I am here looking for a Mark Randolph Bleak he use to live in Alaska and then moved to Elko, Nv that is where I think he still is, but it is imparitive that I keep in touch as to where he is, long story, but I will simply die if I have no idea where he is. Like I said long story and I dont' want to get into it right now, but I need to know that he is still in Elko, Nv or I will have a panic attack!!! wish I had a ph number would be better but for now just knowing he is there is good enough for me! thanks hope someone will see this and let me know if he is still there. Deborah

Dominique Sanders

I'm looking for my baby brothers of whom I've lost trac of after loosing our mom and I would like too know if they are still alive and well it hurts me of what we went through but I can not blame nobody but myself, so please help me I have no resource of money because during that time I have had a little girl also. And I want to do right by her as well but I need to complete what I promised my Mother on her death bed. That I would take good care of my brothers, no matter what.....

Susan Green

If you're looking for a comprehensive people search try www.pipl.com

Peter Molander

Very Interesting! But where are the material taken from and if its based on Wiki ---Houston we got a problem... with data quality. A more field proven service is the UK based high end service Silobreaker (www.silobreaker.com) Rumors says that Silobreaker will launch a free service very soon. Compare...And why don't just use Google--- Wiki seems to be dominating all content...

karthi

Guys
All the best for youcoz you are going to fight with giants like google who knows the pulse of each user..... but remember "one should have healthy disregard for the impossible"

karthikeyanmect.blogspot.com

Anon

Good luck trying to supplant Google/Facebook, not to mention Pipl. Why recreate something that already exists? Wikipedia has just as much info on people, and more!

people search dude

I still can't get over the fact that they recieved \$1 million from Clearstone Venture Partners...