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### People-search startup Spock.com seeks partners, maybe with Google

By [Jacqueline Emigh](#) | Published April 8, 2008, 10:35 AM

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**New search engine venture Spock.com is using a Linux-based software architecture to save money on development. But it's also showing some ingenuity with its business model, focusing on partnership rather than competition.**

NEW YORK CITY (BetaNews) - Now in beta since August of last year, Spock.com specializes in "people searches" across the names of both "ordinary people" and celebrities, said Jay Bhatti, the company's VP for marketing, services, and user experience, during a press briefing last week.

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Over the past eight months, the Web site has handled 30 million search queries, with its query volume going up at the rate of about 30% per month. Each day, Spock indexes about 2 million search results. On average, more than 2,000 new users sign up each day.

The search engine field might be crowded, but the market is ripe for "people search," according to Bhatti, a former Microsoft product manager. "The top three search engines have reported that 23 percent of their query volume is name search," he told

reporters.

Although Spock.com isn't alone in the people search segment, Bhatti contended that Spock's results are more comprehensive and better organized. "That's largely because we have about six engineers who just sit in a room and do nothing but work on writing search algorithms all day," he revealed, adding that out of Spock's staff of 40, 36 employees are engineers, and the other four are marketers.

But one of the first tasks faced by Bhatti and the company's other co-founder, Spock.com CEO Jaideep Singh, was on the marketing side.

"We wanted the Spock.com domain name," according to Bhatti. One reason, he explained, is that the co-founders could see 'Spock' working well as a verb. "'Spock me,'" he illustrated.

"But the domain name was held by the people around Dr. [Benjamin] Spock, the baby doctor. And we also had to bid against the *Star Trek* folks to get it," Bhatti recalled.

Since going live, Spock has been talking with Google about a deal around AdWords, as well as with DoubleClick -- the display advertising company Google has just acquired -- and with MSN and Yahoo about other possible agreements,

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"The social networking sites are really interested, too," according to Bhatti.

Named one of the "ten start-ups to pay attention to in 2008" by Wired magazine, Spock has received funding from Clearstone Venture Partners -- where Spock co-founder Singh was previously an early stage VC -- as well as from Opus Capital and individual investors.

In a demo, Bhatti showed how Spock.com deploys spiders to crawl the Internet for information, taking data from social networks such as MySpace and Friendster as well as other sites and using it to create profiles about people. Spock has indexed about one-fifth of the Web so far, he estimated.

The indexed information can be searched by name, e-mail address, location, or tags, for example. Users can view "news about" and "Web sites about" a person, in addition to "related people." And they can also contribute to Spock.com by producing their own profiles and voting on which photos are best.

Spock.com also uses custom algorithms developed by a team of researchers, faculty and students from Germany's Bauhaus University geared to solving the problem of "entity resolution," or how to distinguish among multiple people with the same name, such as singer Michael Jackson and Baltimore Ravens wide receiver Michael Jackson.

Those custom algorithms may need some tweaking, as BetaNews discovered for itself in [a check of Spock.com's own profile for the latter Mr. Jackson](#) this morning.

In a challenge posed by Spock, the team from Bauhaus won \$50,000 for their solution, which "maps named entities from documents to the correct person," Bhatti told BetaNews. Spock's challenge received 1,500 entries from five different continents.

Meanwhile, all of Spock.com's systems -- including its Apache Web servers and OpenSQL database -- rely on Linux and open source software, despite the fact that Bhatti formerly worked at Microsoft as a product manager for software servers.

"I'm really finding value in open source software, and I've told people at Microsoft that, too. A lot of start-ups couldn't afford to get off the ground without it," Bhatti said.

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