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People-search engines try to be more specific than Google

Verne Kopytoff, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Locate a long-lost friend or old classmate. Get dirt on a potential hire.

These are just a couple of the uses of an emerging group of search engines that find information about people.

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Rather than scouring the entire Internet, these search engines troll only Web sites that are rich with personal information. The results they provide are individual profiles coupled with links to where users can find more details.

The goal is to cut through the clutter that Google and other general-purpose search engines sometimes offer when users enter the name of a friend, co-worker or celebrity. Internet users will flock to people-search upstarts, their founders hope, to get more-relevant information more quickly.

"The ways people want to find one another are increasingly moving online," said Michael Tanne, chief executive of Wink, a people-search engine that premiered in March. "A service like ours can give you a bead on the person you're looking for - 'Oh, they live in Santa Cruz' - or about the person you're interviewing with for a new job."

Enter the name of tennis star Roger Federer into a people-search engine, for instance, and you are likely to get a profile of him as the top result that includes photographs, a brief biography and links to some other Web sites about him.

For a lesser-known individual, the results can be hit-or-miss. A query of the average company vice president may fail to return a photograph and biography, but instead point to that person's resume on the LinkedIn business networking site.

Users can also search by attribute, like Scientologist, to get a list of individuals identified online as being part of that religion.

In addition to Wink, in Los Altos, there's Spock, unveiled this month to great fanfare. The Redwood City company received so much attention on its first day that its servers were overloaded and nearly ground the Web site to a halt.

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Pipl, PeekYou and WikiYou are also in the people-search mix, though they feature far smaller indexes and therefore more-spotty results. ZoomInfo, a people-search engine focused on the business world, is a relative industry veteran, founded in 2001.

A central question is whether people-search engines are useful enough to steal a significant number of users from the general-purpose sites. Even challengers that focus on a particular niche have a poor track record.

Sapna Satagopan, an analyst for JupiterResearch, agreed that finding information about individuals - aside from celebrities - can be difficult on Google and its rivals. But she questioned whether there is enough room for all of the people-search engines that are trying to dominate the niche.

"I'll still go to Google and another search engine," Satagopan said. "But I don't need to go to three of them."

In general, people-search engines plan to make money from advertising. For now, their efforts are mostly limited to a few search-engine-style ads, although the executives behind the companies say that more-ambitious types of advertising are planned.

ZoomInfo is an anomaly in that it charges subscriptions for a souped-up version of its service that is aimed at recruiters and marketers.

People-search engines cull their information from Wikipedia, MySpace, LinkedIn, Friendster, various blogging services and other public sources. But the fact that they are offering up only public information hasn't insulated the engines from problems.

Lists of keywords, or tags, that the engines automatically generate for individuals, based on what's online about them, are sometimes unflattering. Someone who has written about child abuse, for example, may be linked with the tag "pedophile."

In addition, the information the search engines provide isn't always reliable. The results occasionally include fake profiles or profiles of people who are only tangentially related to a query.

"People say they are George Bush or Superman," said Jaideep Singh, chief executive of Spock. "It's an ongoing battle."

Filtering has removed many fake profiles from the service, he said, though he acknowledged that some still slip through.

People-search engines invite users to become members, which opens the door to additional participation. Users who sign up can "claim their profile" and edit the information it contains.

Allowing users to add biographical information, images or tags is supposed to give them a chance to project a more complete image of themselves to the world. It also does the job of improving the Web site's quality.

Policies for removing inaccurate or embarrassing material vary. Spock allows users to vote down an image or tag so that it isn't as prominent. Users also can flag an item for

the Web site's staff to review and remove.

Wink allows users to edit information themselves. Users also can have their profile removed entirely by contacting Wink through its customer feedback system.

For now, traffic to people-search engines is relatively light. ZoomInfo reported 895,000 unique U.S. users in July, while Wink had 90,000, according to comScore Media Metrix. Neither site even approached 1 percent of Google's 124 million visitors during the month.

Third-party numbers for Spock weren't available. However, the company claims do be outdoing the rest of the field with more than 1 million unique visitors during the first few weeks that its Web site was publicly available.

The executives operating people-search engines also say that their services, as they are, are a far cry from what they'll be like in the future. The Web sites will offer users more profiles that feature additional kinds of information such as video from more sources.

"In six months," said Singh, of Spock, "it's going to be a different story with how much content is on the site."

People-search engines

Looking for an ex? Planning a family reunion? Anyone owe you money? Try out these free search sites:

-- Spock (www.spock.com)

-- Wink (www.wink.com)




-- Zoominfo (www.zoominfo.com)

What they do

Rather than scouring the entire Internet, these search engines look only at Web sites rich with personal information, like Wikipedia, MySpace, LinkedIn and Friendster. The results they provide are individual profiles coupled with links to where users can find more details.

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