

Q&A with Spock.com's Jay Bhatti

By Erik Sherman | Oct 28, 2008

Spock.com is a relatively new search engine focusing on information about people. Co-founder **Jay Bhatti** was formerly a **Microsoft** product managers in Windows server marketing and then in consumer services. He left in 2006 to help start Spock. We spoke with him about the company and its current activities.



BNET: *Your PR firm wrote that Spock.com is “considered the leading people search index on the web and rivals Google, MySpace, Live, and Friendster when it comes to people search.” On what figures or studies do you base that?*

Jay Bhatti: You can look at articles at **TechCrunch**, **BusinessWeek**. **Tim O’Reilly** and **VentureBeat** have talked about us. Our traffic is growing about 25 percent a month every month, we’re beating out more of our competition for distribution deals. I think you’ll see more and more that partners want to work with us as a leading [source of information about people]. Look at the accolades and awards as well: best in class at **Web 2.0 Expo**, accolades from **PC World**, from **CNET**.

BNET: *I’m not trying to be contentious, but many companies that received a lot of positive press have gone belly up, and business partners have self interest when making such a statement. How about independent assessments by the analyst firms?*

JB: We’ve reached out to some of these independent companies. They said, “We’re going to review the people search space.” But it’s fast and growing and hasn’t been covered by the independent analysts [yet]. We’re looking forward to having independent [study]. I think we’ll do very well in those. Until one of those reports come out, the things we have to rely on is the awards we’ve won, the number of magazines that have said we’re the ones to watch, our usage growth, and the partners we’re getting.

BNET: *Who do you see as your serious competition?*

JB: From the pure people search space it would be [such companies as] **iSearch.com**, **Wink.com**, and **Pipl.com**. They all have a pretty different strategy of how to execute in the market. Pipl is focused on doing a simple metasearch and not creating their own content. Wink is doing more social search and that type of extraction. The focus we’ve had is building out a very big IR [information retrieval] team and [doing] our own crawling and information extraction.”

BNET: *What do you think users are looking for?*

JB: They want to be able to type in a name or some type of attribute and they want the answers to come back instantaneously. Most likely they look at more than one source. They’ll do a search on Google and then **Yahoo** because the index is a little different and the answers are a little different. What we want is that you type in Google and then go to Spock and do an advanced search.

BNET: *Don’t most people use only one search engine?*

JB: That’s not what the data we’ve seen has shown. It came from another independent source. It basically said that people surprisingly use more than one search engine when they’re looking for something specific. For example, if you want to book an airline ticket, you might go to Google and type in cheapest ticket, then you might go to **Expedia** or **Kayak** because these sites do a pretty decent job on that particular vertical. You do the same thing on products as well. For a laptop, you might go to Google and then go to **Dell.com** or **Shopping.com** or **Amazon.com**.

BNET: *So you want to be that second choice when someone is looking for information on a person?*

JB: Exactly. That’s the mindset we’re trying to build into the consumer. We want you to think of us as the Amazon of people search.

BNET: *That means you’re trying to get people to change their habits. How do you manage that?*

JB: It's not changing their habits. They do what they do on the web. Trying to get them to change their habits in reading is really hard. What we're trying to do is like Kayak. You do this by getting good information on your product out and then keep improving your product. That's the most important thing. If you get a user who hears about it from a friend or reads about it and they go to Spock and say, "Whoa, this is pretty good." It's hard to build a brand because there are so many sites out there. It's not 1996 when if you have a web site that's halfway interesting that people will come by because there's not a lot else. It's important to work with distribution partners or syndication partners, web sites that want people search and get them to say powered by Spock. It's going to give us more search volume, give a better experience for our users, and give us incremental revenue that we wouldn't have gotten otherwise.

BNET: *So you depend on partners to give you exposure. But aren't larger sites moving away from promoting brands that aren't their own?*

JB: I thought that too, but there are still a lot of these co-branding [deals] going on. MSN is one of the most trafficked properties in the world, but if I click on dating or real estate, it's syndication through partners. Yahoo is the same way and has a lot of their stuff being powered by other services. As we go in the marketplace, we notice that a lot of these companies don't have the resources, energy, and resources to focus on some little thing that would be valuable. It's a very easy win for them. I went to a major online property that does music and things like that. They said, "We'd love to have biographies of celebrities. We only have the time to source this on the top 50 celebrities, but we know there are thousands of celebrities that would get us a lot of traffic." When a b-list celebrity has news about them, they'll go to the partner site because they know there's good content on it. Sometimes the best attribution is that we power that content. You see that all the time. I haven't seen that much of a pushback from partners that we look at. They're usually fine with "powered by Spock." A company says for consumer experience, we want to say powered by whatever so the consumer knows the data is coming from this source and we're being honest with them. If something's wrong with the data, they're not liable. It is a peculiar thing in the tech space. You don't see Ford saying engine made by Mitsubishi in Japan.

BNET: *But that was like the deal Yahoo once had with Google. Then after Google became known and starting getting the traffic directly, you could argue that Yahoo hurt its business.*

JB: They thought they were in the business of content, and Google didn't. When you look at some other areas like financial data, a lot of these sites — Google Finance, Yahoo Finance, MSN Finance — they'll get data provided by Reuters or Bloomberg. That partnership won't go away soon because they don't want to get into the financial information game. And that's probably what [former Yahoo CEO and chairman] Terry Semel thought when he did the deal with Google.

BNET: *What are you focusing on now?*

JB: There are three things we're focused on in the company. One is to continuously refine the product. Number two is working with our partners and getting more distribution deals and traffic to the site. The more we know about the data people are looking for, the more we can design the products for that. And then what are the best venues to make the product as monetizable as possible."

BNET: *What are your revenues?*

JB: We can't share that right now. We want to keep that revenue and cost data private. Our monetization scheme is pretty simple. We show text ads that are relevant to the search you did. We can't monetize as well [as general search] because no one is typing in plasma TV. But we are going to monetize a lot better than any social network could do because we do have intent. When people come to Spock they are looking for information. If the ads are relevant, we get a decent click-through conversion. It all comes down to making sure the advertisers have a good quality experience.

BNET: *What keeps you up at night?*

JB: I feel pretty confident about our business because we're focusing on the right things. I'm not worried about consumers because they will continue to do people searches. The real thing I look at is the capital markets today. It was a correct adjustment they made. I just worry that they'll go too far in the other extreme where they don't invest in anything. I noticed in the last week or so that people are investing a pretty big round into Like.com. I think a lot of VCs are saying that there are only a small number of deals in the Valley that are really interesting. The people who build those businesses will have pretty good options on their hands.

BNET: *How long before you break even?*

JB: I don't know. One of the things about a start-up, it's like a rocket ship. For us breaking even is about having more distribution. If we get two or three more big deals we'll be close to breaking even. I look at it not as much of a timeline as getting deals done. If we close three big deals that we have in the pipeline tomorrow, we could be break even next week. We're thinking in terms of the last quarter of 2009.

Tags: [test](#), [Amazon.com Inc.](#), [Google Inc.](#), [Microsoft Corp.](#), [Yahoo! Inc.](#), [Co-founder](#), [Erik Sherman](#), [Web](#), [Celebrity](#), [Spock.com](#), [Spock](#), [JB](#), [Pipl](#), [Channel Management](#), [Financial Accounting](#), [Search](#), [Marketing](#), [Finance](#)

Erik Sherman is a freelance journalist whose work has appeared in Newsweek, the New York Times Magazine, Technology Review, the Financial Times, Chief Executive, and other publications. Follow him on [Twitter](#).

Voice your 2cents