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Success Profiles

Business First of Columbus

ClouserLook seeks out information buried within Web

Dan Eaton

For Business First

Almost a quarter of the checks Jim Karnath sees in his business bears an incorrect address. Around one in 10 has a wrong phone number.

When your business is guaranteeing checks, backing up that promise when a check bounces and its writer cannot be found is almost a daily occurrence.

Karnath, president of the area franchise for Louisville, Ky.-based CheckCare Enterprises LLC, said he relies on every tool possible to track down debtors, and thanks to a Westerville company that box of search tools is a little less cluttered.

The appropriately named Gotcha is a specialized search engine created by ClouserLook Search Systems Inc. It culls information from a variety of sources inaccessible to standard Internet search engines.

ClouserLook is the creation of Sumithra Ramachandran, who started an information technology consulting company in Montreal in 1998. The consultancy evolved into ClouserLook, which creates search engines, such as Gotcha, to explore the deep Web.

The deep Web, or invisible Web as it is called, includes Internet content that is not accessible through traditional search engines, such as those created and run by industry giants Google Inc. and Yahoo Inc. Often the content is in the form of databases and is estimated to make up a significant portion of Web content, some placing the share as high as 75 percent.

"There is so much valuable content in the deep Web," said Ramachandran, who moved to Columbus last spring from Canada. "You just need someone to organize the info and present it in a usable form for the end user."



Moving along: Sumithra Ramachandran moved her deep Web-based business to Columbus from Canada last year.

Janet Adams, Business First

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Office network

The development of CloserLook even surprises its founder.

Using her money, Ramachandran started the company as Goa Technologies and planned to do consulting work for large public companies. She began work related to the deep Web as a pilot project for the Canadian government.

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Seeing untapped potential, she then decided to focus the business on that, and by 2000 the company launched the platform for its search engines.

The platform was not enough, though.

"Three years ago, we were a four-stroke engine belching smoke," she said.

More focus was needed, so she targeted specific markets - business background research, skip tracing, medical research, airline fares - and has been working to develop searches in each.

Last year brought another change to the business when Ramachandran moved the core business to Central Ohio, hoping to establish more clients in the United States. Ramachandran's husband is an Ohio native and the pair decided the Buckeye State was a nice, central location.

"The West Coast was just too far away for us," she said. "We didn't want to go to New York or New Jersey, either. It is just a different culture there."

The company headquarters, where all design and development occurs, is in Westerville. The company also has offices in Montreal and India.

If she had it again, Ramachandran said she would have found a partner with extensive business experience, which would have saved the small company a few tough years.

"I'm a tech person. I do design," she said. "We have a business expert now, but I wish we would've gotten (one) sooner."

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Her technical experience, however, has produced a reliable product, she said. The engines are plug-and-play types, built-to-order and created to integrate into a company's system.

Seeking versatility

The client base includes law firms, which use searches for due diligence on businesses; credit collection agencies, such as CheckCare; and pharmacies and insurers, which are targeted with CloserLook's newest product - Hippocrates, a medical research search engine.

Enter a search term into the engine and it will return a definition, contact information for related national organizations, images and diagrams, frequently asked questions, causes, treatments, symptoms, natural remedies and news links.

OnCorp Direct Inc., based in Toronto, licenses the technology for its work with law firms and other businesses, providing access to an array of U.S. and Canadian government search engines.

"We never provided these services until CloserLook came along," said Eric Tong, OnCorp business manager. "Our clients would have had to go source to source, going to each state's Web site or pay someone else to ... get the information."

The search produces a single, comprehensive report of a company's value, assembled from information on government sites, and business name and domain name searches.

"It does the grunt work for you," he said.

Karnath said CheckCare is pleased with Gotcha, which lets him find the phone numbers and addresses of debtors faster.

"There is an accuracy and currency we haven't been able to get elsewhere," said Christine Singer, CheckCare's collection manager.

"When we get numbers from CloserLook, we can be pretty darn sure we're getting a number that is accurate," she said.

Tong knows of several companies dealing with deep Web searches, but has yet to find one that equals CloserLook.

"There is always a danger with being ahead of the curve," he said. "Sometimes you wind up paving the path for others to benefit, but (Ramachandran) has been able to make something useful."

The business has doubled its revenue in the last two years to between \$500,000 and \$700,000 in 2004. The next objective is finding more markets to move into.

Hippocrates still is in nascent form, but Ramachandran said the company has high hopes for it, which is available in a free version on the company's Web site. The goal, she said, is to be a one-stop-shop for businesses or individuals seeking medical information.

Once that is established, the company will explore other markets to enter, she said.

But the future work for Ramachandran is not limited to growing the business. She hopes to expand the knowledge of the deep Web by writing articles on the topic for industry and national publications, as well as writing a book about the field.

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