

LeapFish hopes for success in crowded field of metasearch

January 21 2009, By Scott Duke Harris

"It's OK," the message on the LeapFish home page assures visitors, "you're not cheating on Google."

Such is the stature of Google, the world's ever steady, ever ready common-law spouse of a search engine.

If you remember the first few times you Googled, perhaps the first time you were "feeling lucky," you may recall how its algorithms seemed to work like magic. And you kept coming back for more, breaking hearts at Yahoo, Microsoft and Ask.com.

But if Googling now seems routine and stale -- if the old thrill is gone -- LeapFish aims to liven things up, as if proposing kind of a digital menage a trois.

Or, to be less kinky and more geeky about it: If Google is Search 1.0, isn't it time for Search 2.0?

That, precisely, is the lofty aim of LeapFish, says Behnam Behrouzi, the 27-year-old serial entrepreneur behind what he portrays as a "multidimensional" leap forward among so-called "metasearch" aggregators.

The search for Search 2.0 is essentially headed in two directions: vertical and horizontal.

As the Web has grown more cluttered, consumers are looking beyond Google, Yahoo, MSN and Ask.com, which quickly offer breadth of information but less depth. The wave of vertical search startups include niche sites such as Retrevo for electronic gear, SimplyHired and Indeed for job seekers, UpTake and Kayak for travel, Trulia and Zillow for real estate, and Center'd for local event planning.

On the horizontal front, Ask.com, the fourth-ranked search engine, has recently reported improved performance of its search functions after introducing a "semantic" approach, which is said to more closely divine a user's intentions than the conventional keyword search.

Meanwhile, speculation abounds that Yahoo, under new Chief Executive Carol Bartz, may resume negotiations to sell its search business to Microsoft, creating a more formidable challenge to Google's dominance.

LeapFish hopes to break out as the best of metasearchers, a field of aggregators that also includes Search.com, Clusty, Dogpile and Zuula. LeapFish is a kind of one-stop mash-up that pulls into one interface not only the search functions of Google, Yahoo and MSN, but also those of YouTube, Amazon, eBay.

"We get it all for you," Behrouzi said during a demo last week.

None of the metasearch engines have exactly wowed a world largely hooked on Google. Indeed, LeapFish itself was panned in November by a TechCrunch blog report with the headline: "LeapFish Launches Another Meta Search Engine No One Will Ever Use."

But Behrouzi is promising LeapFish will offer a host of advances that, he hopes, will prove TechCrunch wrong. The recent demonstration showed how LeapFish has eliminated the search button. Rather, the search process begins with the first letter of type. "Just Type It" is a

LeapFish motto.

Behrouzi described LeapFish's new functions as "superfast" and "revolutionary." In a few months, users will be able to customize LeapFish to their particular needs, he said.

To your correspondent, a frequent Googler, the elimination of the search button seemed of dubious value. But a comparison of LeapFish to Search.com, Dogpile, Clusty and Zuula revealed a substantially more intriguing homepage. While the others tend to have the Spartan, simple look of Google, LeapFish also features recent news and windows of videos.

"We believe some search goals require a more multi-dimensional approach to finding deep information that we usually end up hunting for or just never think of looking for in the first place," LeapFish said in a press release.

LeapFish's technology and format may offer more surprising search results than conventional googling, Behrouzi said. For example, the search for a person's name may alert users to a video that a standard search may not have provided.

I decided to test it. Googling my own name on LeapFish was no more interesting than doing so on Google. But when I typed in the name of my friend Peter Schmuck, LeapFish called up not only his "The Schmuck Stops Here" blog in the Baltimore Sun, but a photo and a mildly humorous video.

I was even more surprised to see a photo of baseball pro J.J. Putz -- all because of a memorable story headlined "Schmuck Interviews Putz."

Another key factor in LeapFish's bid for success is its novel advertising

model. Inspired by the robust market for domain names, LeapFish is selling the rights to keywords that ensure a prominent and permanent placement of ads on the site.

As the site becomes popular, the value of the keywords would rise accordingly, and the owners of keywords can resell them. So the market is open for speculation.

For now, LeapFish is wholly funded by Behrouzi's company DotNext, which also operates a Web marketing service called iHype. Behrouzi said he plans to seek venture capital to expand LeapFish.

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