

AOL plants Seed for Internet Age news operation

March 17 2010, by Glenn Chapman



The logo of Internet firm AOL in Hamburg, Germany. The faded web giant is reinventing itself as a digital age news operation with an army of freelance writers wielding online tools.

Faded Internet star AOL is reinventing itself as a digital age news operation with an army of freelance writers wielding online tools.

Fresh from being spun off by Time Warner in December, [AOL](#) launched Seed.com to groom freelance writing talent to crank out stories for its array of websites on topics ranging from pets and sports to politics

and technology.

"AOL is repositioning itself as a news and information company," Seed programming director Saul Hansell said Tuesday as he demonstrated the website at the annual South By South West (SXSW) gathering of technophiles here.

"This is really just taking the freelance writing model that has existed forever and using the Internet to make it vastly more efficient," Hansell said.

"We have a chance with Seed and a lot of our other assets to make a big difference in journalism," he said.

Hansell worked for 17 years as a reporter and [blogger](#) at The [New York Times](#) before joining Seed three months ago.

AOL editors post assignment descriptions on an online Seed bulletin board. Pay for writing jobs ranges from five dollars to 300 dollars per article.

Writers then submit their versions of a story along with headlines and pictures. AOL editors sift through queues of submissions deciding whether to accept, reject or kick stories back for improvement.

"Some of the assignments serve as an audition," Hansell said. "We get to know you, you get to know us, and you are invited into our extended family of freelancers."

Authors names are displayed on stories at AOL Web properties without "asterisks saying 'look at the cute little citizen journalists,'" Hansell said.

Freelancers that have proven themselves may be given personal

assignments and invited to pitch story ideas.

"We can use this methodology to write about vastly more things on a much broader scale than other models," Hansell said.

Seed, for example, assembled a team of 500 freelance writers that collectively interviewed for stories each of the approximately 2,000 bands slated to perform during the renowned music portion of SXSW.

Seed is in a testing phase and is expected to evolve with feedback.

AOL's dial-up Web access business has been supplanted by high-speed broadband services and the company, formerly known as America Online, is currently the number four gateway to the Web after Google, Microsoft and Yahoo!

AOL chairman and chief executive Tim Armstrong, a former Google executive who took the reins of AOL in March, has said he plans to refocus the company on "content, ads and communications."

In what is considered one of the most disastrous mergers ever, Time Warner combined with America Online in 2001 at the height of the dot-com boom with AOL using its inflated stock as currency for the transaction.

Time Warner was forced in 2002 to massively write down the value of AOL and the AOL name was removed from the group's corporate title in 2003.

AOL became a separate traded company on December 10.

AOL properties include online map service Mapquest, technology blog Engadget, social network Bebo and other sites.

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