

Startup Ranker helps brands tailor ads

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If Fox Searchlight Pictures wants to increase attendance at its new film "Jackie," it might consider pitching fans of "True Detective," "The Hunger Games" and Keira Knightley.

So says Ranker, a Los Angeles startup that gets more than 10 million votes on its website each month about what's cool in Hollywood, sports, music, gaming and politics. Ranker's tracking shows that people who rank "Jackie" star Natalie Portman as a great actress tend to also hold in high regard the popular HBO show, the teenage film franchise and English actress Knightley.

The company is just starting to make data about such correlations available to the public, leaving uncertainty about whether customers will use the service the way it envisions. But Ranker is trying to land lucrative contracts to sell the data to entertainment companies, talent agencies and advertisers. The hope is that seeing how pop culture fandoms intersect will help Hollywood studios and other firms cast, develop and market productions. Less extensive Ranker data is free.

The information business would become a second major source of revenue for Ranker. The 7-year-old company said it attracted a record 36 million readers in November. Typically arriving from Facebook or Google, readers can scan through more 100,000 lists such as Best Actresses Working Today and Best TV Shows of the Last 20 Years. Ranker's editorial team offers an initial ranking but anyone can vote anytime without having to log in, making the lists a sort of living document.

Ranker sells ads on its website, bringing in annual revenue in the low eight figures and multimillion-dollar profits before taxes and other expenses. It declined to provide exact figures on the record.

The fast-growing ad business has prompted companies to express interest in acquiring Ranker. But Chief Executive Clark Benson said he won't decide whether to sell or raise additional venture capital at least until he gets an early sense of the new data initiative's performance. He also wants to launch a mobile app and test voting formats beside a list.

"Next year would be the time to nail down the big-picture strategy," Benson said.

He started working on Ranker about a year after selling ECrush, a social media dating service, to Hearst in late 2006. Benson had enjoyed rankings since his early childhood in the 1970s, saying he'd read books of lists "10 times cover to cover."

But in the internet age, he questioned why lists still were just one person or one publication's opinion.

"Our bread and butter is crowd-sourced rankings," Benson said. "We can poll everything Gallup is never going to poll."

Ranker doesn't have personal details like the names or email addresses for all of its users - a demerit on the score sheet of potential partners. But it can use cookies and other web-tracking tools to monitor how someone who ranks Kanye West highly on one list gives Chipotle a low ranking on another. Ranker could sell its tracking information to advertisers, allowing them to market online to narrow groups (West supporters, for example).

The links between celebrities, movies, brands and other elements of the

world are what Ranker's Chief Data Scientist Ravi Iyer expects will be valuable. Social media apps including Facebook and Twitter offer similar data. But Iyer says they can't match Ranker's precision.

Someone might like 10 actors' pages on Facebook. Ranker gets more detail by parsing out people's thoughts on personality, talent, looks and hundreds more categories. Since people can move entries down the rankings, Ranker also gathers negative sentiments in a way that few services do.

If the data venture doesn't work out, Ranker has other options to diversify revenue. Undisclosed companies have commissioned Ranker to make lists tied to their products, and some have shown interest in Ranker data informing content recommendations in their software, Benson said. But those aren't yet areas of focus.

Investors have given Ranker \$7.5 million, including Benson's initial stake. Other investors are Draper Associates, TenOneTen Ventures, Rincon Venture Partners and Lowercase Capital.

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