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New Search Engine FindingDulcinea Relies on Human Judgment

by Mark Walsh, Tuesday, Nov 20, 2007 7:01 AM ET

GOOGLE, YAHOO, AND MSN ARE the undisputed heavyweights of Web search, commanding more than 90% of the market. But that hasn't stopped scores of startups from challenging them with a variety of specialized search sites catering to niche audiences or those frustrated with the major search engines.

Among the latest is findingDulcinea, (the quirky name taken from the idealized peasant woman in *Don Quixote*), an online directory that relies on human judgment rather than algorithms to find what someone is looking for on the Web.

About.com pioneered people-powered search a decade ago with its network of subject sites moderated by human guides. More recently, a new wave of human-curated search services have emerged including ChaCha, Mahalo, StumbleUpon and HowStuffWorks.com, aimed at substituting pages of search results with hand-picked recommendations.

"We're the librarian of the Internet," says Mark Moran, co-founder and CEO of findingDulcinea, which formally launched Monday. "We don't give you the answers--we tell you where to find the right information." The underlying premise is that Internet users have needs unmet by Google or other big engines. Moran points to a Harris Interactive study commissioned by Yahoo that found 85% of search engine users don't find what they're looking for on the first try.

"We think, in reality, people are putting in 10 to 15 queries and still not getting the right answer," says Moran, previously general counsel of Internet ad network 24/7 Media before moving over to findingDulcinea.

To remedy that perceived problem, the site offers three sections: "Web Guides," which provide search tips and selected links in 16 major category areas; "Beyond the Headlines," which offers historical and other context to top news stories; and "Netcetera," a more magazine-styled section featuring personalities and intriguing stories from around the Web.

While findingDulcinea currently has no search engine, Moran says the site will add one in about a month which will be limited to some 25,000 sites chosen by its staff of writers and researchers. The company currently has a full-time staff of about 30, along with 25 freelance contributors.

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Setting the site apart from competitors, according to Moran, is editorial content and organization that turn a list of links into a user-friendly narrative. So researching a trip to Russia on findingDulcinea starts with a series of basic questions--"How can I explore Russia online?" and "What should I know before I go to Russia?"--that link users to further information and lists of relevant sites.

While the Web guides directory is the core of findingDulcinea's service, Moran hopes the news-oriented Behind the Headlines section will encourage people to make the site their home page. At launch, the site is putting up 3 or 4 stories a day with related background and reference materials, with plans to increase to 10 to 15 stories a day.

To help drive traffic to findingDulcinea, Moran is working with his former employer 24/7 Media to place banners on third-party sites highlighting new stories or features on its site. Moran adds that 24/7 has developed a tool that will let the company change banner text within an hour to spotlight a breaking news story, for instance, on findingDulcinea. The site is currently promoting its Thanksgiving-related directory on other sites.

With regard to advertising on its own site, findingDulcinea plans to expand display advertising across the various categories featured in its Web guides including travel, business and health. It also figures to partner with sites such as Amazon on book recommendations. But that plan won't include any Google AdSense ads, which would undermine the purpose of the site. "That would pervert our mission where we're telling everyone you can trust every link on this site, and then run AdSense ads featuring the hot stock of the day," says Moran.

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