

LookSmart Rolls Out Biggest Vertical Search Launch In Web History

About.com

Phone Briefing with Dave Hills, CEO of LookSmart

I had the pleasure of chatting with Mr. Dave Hills, CEO of LookSmart this morning. LookSmart just rolled out the biggest vertical search offering in the history of the Web, with 13 separate topic clusters and 181 separate vertical search sites. I talked with Dave about LookSmart's vertical search launch and a few other topics, including LookSmart's plans to refine and promote their stellar search services, what LookSmart is focused on most, and more.

Background Information: From 2001 to 2003, Mr. Hills was the COO and President of Sales for About, Inc, so we chatted about where About has been and where it's going, especially with About's recent acquisition by the New York Times. He stated that his About gig was on the "list of his favorite jobs" in his long career, and that even when things were a bit crazy, he would look forward to getting to work every single day (which was nice to hear, since I love being part of the About network!).

LookSmart and Vertical Search: Dave Hills arrived at LookSmart about a year ago, and noted that it had "great assets, great people, but no plan." Based on his over 27 years of experience, he rolled up his sleeves and got to work, knowing that vertical search, or targeted niche searches, was really where the future of search was headed. Dave gave this analogy: back in the 80's, when there were just three big TV networks, people were very dismissive of this new-fangled system called "cable." The pundits declared that maybe, just maybe, regular people could handle more than three channels - maybe even up to 8 or 10 channels. Well, obviously, cable TV took off and there are now literally hundreds of channels that the consumer can choose from.

The same is true with search. Most people know about the big search engines, and will automatically gravitate to those when executing any kind of search. However, vertical search services such as LookSmart offer more than just a general search experience. It's a targeted search, and it can be more effective.

LookSmart and Visibility: How do people find about LookSmart? Hills responded by stating "users will find us because we have a good product." The huge vertical search launch was very successful. Searchers will most likely go to the big search engines first, but over the course of time, searchers will want what is essential, not what is exhaustive. That's where vertical search, and LookSmart, would be most useful. Instead of doing a "needle in the haystack" search, users could go to LookSmart and do quick and easy searches for quick meal ideas, for example. From the consumer's point of view, LookSmart could be a complimentary service to the large search services out there, providing a quick and easy way to find relevant answers.

LookSmart Corporate Information: LookSmart is one of five companies (Google, Yahoo, Ask Jeeves, MSN Search) that crawl and index the Web at any scale. Because we're ten years old and started by being a Web directory, we've got that directory structure together with our "find, save, share" philosophy.

LookSmart licenses its' technology as well; for instance, the New York Times utilizes Furl in its paid subscription services. Ask Jeeves licenses LookSmart's ad center. It's a triple threat: LookSmart's vertical search sites, their external ad network, and licensing of Looksmart technology.

LookSmart: Find, Save, Share: LookSmart's article tool, FindArticles.com allows the user to browse over ten million articles. That's the "find". LookSmart's Furl tool allows the searcher to save whatever they've found in the context of actually searching (rather than two separate activities, finding and saving). Hills believes that bookmarking makes sense in the context of actually searching, rather than making finding and saving two separate and divided activities like other bookmarking services such as del.icio.us.. The "share" part of LookSmart's philosophy is this: all Furled results are stacked in a searchable database. You can see different pages that other people have Furled - this amounts to user generated content that updates itself. Obviously, this is a huge draw for searchers, as they can find, save, and share globally throughout the LookSmart network.

It's a Big Launch - LookSmart's Huge Vertical Search Offering: Hills stated that one of the reasons LookSmart launched all of their vertical search channels and sites in one day was visibility. Visibility gets LookSmart in front of the user, and the user is the absolute priority for LookSmart.

LookSmart and Nasdaq: (I reported last week that LookSmart recieved a Nasdaq de-listing notice): Hills remarked that the LookSmart launch is still too new to see what kind of impact it will have on shares and NASDAQ listings, but they're just under a threat of de-listing right now. As long as LookSmart trades above \$1.00 for the next eight days, they'll be fine.

LookSmart Bottom Line: What our audience wants is the first priority. We want to provide an easy service for people to use; the thing we really have to focus on is "what is going to cause the average searcher to come back multiple times a month and consume a lot of pages?" The product we put out yesterday (vertical search channels and sites) was good, but over the next twelve months we'll focus even more on defining and designing vertical search so people will want to use it. We've got a single-minded approach to this: value for use.