



RICHARD ARLESS JR. THE GAZETTE

John Connolly (left) and Zsolt Szigetvari are the founders of Internet search directory Zenome.

Zenome takes community approach

Technology, intelligence unite

Contributors to Internet search directory help build and edit the site

The wired world is only now catching up to Zsolt Szigetvari and John Connolly

A recent article in Wired magazine wondered when Internet searches would start combining the best of technology with the best of human intelligence in a comprehensive way.

"We saw that and said: 'Man, that's what we've been doing for two years,'" said Szigetvari, founder of Zenome.com, an Internet search directory.

Money, of course, was the obstacle, in a way it isn't with, say, Bill Gates, or those two do-gooders at Google.



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But now, the incipient system is up and running - and waiting for the rush. Zenome (the sub-name was to be 'the digital genome,' but the phrase was already trademarked) has no pretensions of battling Google or Yahoo.

For one thing, it's a search directory, not a search engine.

For another, it's community-based - so that contributors can help build and edit the site.

A big knock against Google and other search engines is that a search's first few results are pertinent, but soon degenerate into a mish-mash of irrelevant sites with only tenuous connections to the search.

"Google and others are based on software which use a combination of letters and key words to find results," said Connolly, president of Zenome. "With a directory, you type (a search) in the same way, but every page that comes up has been placed there by a human being."

Typically, an Internet directory's Webmaster will assemble contributors, usually someone

with either a passion for or special knowledge about a particular field - cars, sports, travel or anything else.

These editors add human intelligence, reasoning and experience to a process generally done by software.

Zenome is currently using the subject categories of DMOZ (dmoz.org), the large international, open and free-to-use directory to the Web.

Szigetvari said he hopes to be able to use Zenome's own site directly within a couple months.

"Yes, a search engine can go through 8 billion pages in three seconds, and we can't," Connolly said. "So what we did was find a third way - fewer pages, but much more precise, relevant results."

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The input from experts and aficionados around the world would allow Zenome to grow exponentially and quickly into an authoritative database – like all the best books in a library, rather than a mountain of so-so or downright bad books at a thrift shop.

Szigetvari and Connolly readily admit directories also face problems, the most serious being that they can quickly get bogged down because of their very strength: human interaction.

Sheer fatigue and the time commitment required by unpaid editors can make them lose interest after a time.

So Zenome decided to pay its editors – not a lot, but enough to keep them interested in a secondary source of income.

The formula includes intermittent payments, that is, a very modest sum to regular contributors who are particularly productive and helpful, just to keep them in the game.

The two partners, both communications teachers at Dawson College who also teach at Concordia University, are intensely busy these days getting the site organized, adding and deleting categories and signing up contributing experts.

"We need to get people out there and index," Szigetvari said.

Once that intense initial phase is over, though, he added that the "whole structure becomes self-organizing."

Zenome is in the launch phase, and Connolly said it's "unrealistic to talk about financial goals two or three years from now. It's a function of how many people come to us, how quickly."

"As much as we'd like to make a pile of money," added Szigetvari, "our goals are more long-term and community-rooted."

So don't expect Zenome to become another Yahoo or Google – although if it does, they won't complain.

Zenome's per-hit revenues could be as low as a few pennies each to \$25 – for, appropriately enough, gambling sites.

What Szigetvari says he's most proud of is the community commitment by Zenome, especially for far-flung editors. A \$10 or \$20 payment might not mean much to most Canadians, but could be a great help to someone in the developing world.

Like the big players, Zenome will also have sponsored links, the source of the revenues they will share with the editors. "Say someone buys a book from Amazon from our site – we get a commission, but we share it with the editor of that category."

One of the advantages of a directory is the ability to counter the SEO (search engine optimization) phenomenon in which rich companies pay \$20,000 or more to appear at the top of the sponsored links – usually the first and only one people will click on.

"We're designed to counter that – we're striving to be an organic and unbiased," Connolly said. "The system's intended to be the most relevant and most objective."

"We believe the model is unique," Szigetvari said, "incredibly powerful and of great use to the community."

"So we'll see where it takes us."

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