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CellSpin Expanding Cell phone to the Next Level

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Sara frequents MySpace to connect with her old friends, make new ones, and drum up jobs. Well, this social networking savvy homemaker isn't in front of a computer; instead, she uploads pictures and taps into the celebrated social network from her cellphone. "During my son's birth, I used the CellSpin app installed in my mobile phone to post pictures to Flickr, Myspace, and other social networking websites from the hospital. You can also use it to upload videos to sites like YouTube," says a cheery Sara.

Mobile phones have rapidly become an essential and integral part of our daily lives. With over 4 billion people being touched by a cell signal every day, the mobile penetration has exceeded 2 billion connections globally. That's why the mobile applications area has become one of the hot spaces to watch nowadays.

The San Jose, CA, based CellSpin is one such mobile applications company that is all set to leverage the emergent opportunity to start a revolution by expanding the capacity of the cell phone to the next level. CellSpin's innovative, user-friendly application, which is being used by number of social networking enthusiasts across over 120 countries, and growing with every new app store launch, enables the user to share photos, videos, audio, and text on the Internet quickly and painlessly. "With our simple and quick technology, you'll never want to go back to the old way of uploading," says a jubilant Bobby Gurvinder Singh, CellSpin CEO and Co-founder. As an extension of this opportunity, today, CellSpin has been successful in extending its products to the radio and TV stations as well, wherein listeners or viewers can send audio, video, photos, and text to the websites of these stations.

When CellSpin was founded in 2006, social networking was just gaining momentum and was expected to be the next big thing in the Web 2.0 arena, founders Bobby Gurvinder Singh and Marcos Klein, both Cisco veterans, envisioned the revolutionary opportunity the convergence of mobile and Web 2.0 was to open up. Why can't the cell phone in your pocket become a fertile territory for the hugely popular social networking trend? Though social networks take different forms, they typically link folks with common interests and values. The mobile variety tends to appeal to the throngs of young people who have an insatiable desire to stay connected at all times. And mobiles could also help in this. The logic was proved perfect. "That was the beginning of our journey. We set out to build the mobile application that helps users send media content to a wide range of destinations from websites, email addresses, and mobiles, which we call as mobile blogging platform. Just as you receive email and SMS messages on your cell, you can access the status updates," says Singh.

Certainly, mobile blogging is emerging as a hot market segment with immense potential. According to available data, about 10 percent of adult mobile phone owners in the U.S. regularly access mobile blogging services and this number will almost double in 2011. In many respects, mobile could be a natural extension of the PC social networking experience in coming days.

Facebook co-founder Dustin Moskovitz says, citing Facebook's mobile user base that grows faster than that of the website, "Nowadays things that are inherently social are inherently mobile." Thus, phones provide immediacy not typically possible on a PC. What is intriguing is that folks can comment on a restaurant, concert, or dinner date during the activity. And friends may not wait until they get home to tell them how the date went! For most people, camera phones are the place where life's precious moments flourish. Snap a photo of a favorite pet dog, and with CellSpin's technology you can share your interest and joy by posting it on your social networking site directly from the mobile!

Well, CellSpin initially had a plan to build such mobile applications for the smartphones. However, as the company evolved they learnt that smartphones would occupy only 15 percent of the total mobile segment, which made the founders to build the apps for non-smartphones as well. Today, CellSpin has premium application for 300 plus Smartphone models worldwide for media upload and mobile SMS, MMS, and email support for all non-smartphones worldwide.

So with CellSpin mobile application and SMS, MMS, and email service, one no longer has to wait to get to his computer to post audio, video, photos, and text to the favorite websites simultaneously, like Facebook, MySpace, Blogger, YouTube, Picasa, Flickr, Live Journal, and Live Spaces, with others to follow. "What is interesting is that by using the CellSpin software and by selecting multiple publishers on the post screen one can send the content to multiple sites at the same time making

life of a user much easier, which is our key differentiator. And CellSpin is the first and only mobile application enabling mobile phone users to seamlessly integrate multimedia content to live eBay auctions,” claims Singh.

Today, CellSpin is seeing an ever-growing demand from users across the world. As of now, the company offers its application free for its users, as it is mobile advertisement supported. The application, which is successful on the iPhone platform as well, and is soon launching on Android platform, is available in various app stores, including Apple's iTunes, Blackberry app store, and Nokia's Ovi store. “Users, assuming they are already signed up for an account, can also download their apps for Apple iPhone, Blackberry Curve and Pearl, Blackberry Storm, Windows Mobile, Palm OS, and Nokia S60 at their respective websites.

Though the company is currently offering its advertisement-supported apps for free to its users, it aims to charge the users for its mobile applications soon. Though mobile advertising is big, it's not growing as fast as it used to be and as estimated, which prompted CellSpin to launch premium apps wherein users need to buy the application for use. “Also, the big question for us was sustainability in user behaviour. Stickiness factor becomes important in this business. Once the user downloads his app, he may be active for initial few weeks or months. Later on, people's interest in using the app dies down, due to which advertisers may pull off. Hence, if you charge users for the apps, one will get his investment upfront, rather than waiting for advertisement revenues to fill your investments,” adds Singh.

The Extended Opportunity

Singh says, “Let us say you have a radio show, TV show, or you are a famous blogger, celebrity, artist: How do your listeners, viewers, and fans interact with you or your show on your own website. Community blog is a form of blog that allows you and your community to interact with each other, using content from both mobile and the Web on your own website.”

It was in 2008 that CellSpin's founders began exploring another potential market. Why not approach radio stations, TV stations, and media organizations? Even these organizations want to keep their millions of listeners, readers, and viewers engaged with them. For a typical user, there is no easy way to interact or share their pictures, audio, video, and text with their favorite radio or TV station from their mobile other than through email. “Even radio stations wanted the ability for their listeners to send pictures, audio, video, or text, from their cellphones to the station's website. All the big channels like CNN might have the financial muscle to implement such a capability, which may not be true in the case of small and medium FM radio stations. “That's why, sensing the needs of the radio stations, we decided to approach them,” says Singh. Today, there are about 13,000 radio stations in the U.S, and 700 in Canada, and about 2,000 newspapers, over 2,000 TV stations, about 100,000 potential widget users pertaining to small and medium businesses in the U.S. and Canada. And the potential worldwide market for the medium sized media properties is 100,000 widgets. In India there are about 500 FM stations as of now, and the numbers are likely go up to 1,000 by 2010.

Foreseeing this, the company started building their second flagship ‘community blogging’ product for this segment. The company has enhanced the same mobile blogging application to suit the new platform wherein the stations can embed one line of code on their websites and enable their users to send the media content to the website by creating a user generated content (UGC) platform. CellSpin UGC platform will provide hosted media storage and backup for all types of UGC, mobile application for all smartphones worldwide for media upload to radio or TV shows, mobile SMS, MMS, and email support for all non-smartphones, integrated live PC Webcam video recording and uploading, integrated live PC audio recording and uploading, integrated file-browse capability for pictures, text, video, and audio uploading inside the UGC widget for radio or TV shows along with integrated facility, security, and spam protection and flagging capabilities for each media type for the user community.

“CellSpin is exactly what terrestrial radio needs to connect with the social media landscape. Their tools allow my listeners to interact with FM radio and it's DJs in ways never before possible and as a result my stations ratings and web page views have quadrupled. CellSpin truly is Radio 2.0,” says Aaron Traylor, Program Director, On-Air DJ at Gap Broadcasting Radio, one of the clients of CellSpin that operates 116 radio stations in 24 markets across the USCellSpin.

Interestingly, even radio stations promote CellSpin apps so that more users can download the apps and more and more of their users can stay in touch with the stations. In fact, his exercise could give a greater mindshare about CellSpin to the listeners of the station. The company offers its application on SaaS model and charges the station based on the views they had got per show widget. They are also planning to charge these radio stations on a monthly basis.

The CellSpin platform is now being used by 10 radio stations in the U.S. The company is working with a major Media Company, which is top player in the radio industry that sells digital technology to radio industry in the U.S. Cellspin is also working with few leading Indian firms to bring the mobile and communityblogging platform to local Indian market. That will have better integration with locally popular social networking sites like Orkut, BigAdda and many more.

Well, what is intriguing is that in terms of acquiring users, the mobile blogging and community blogging are totally different ballgames. And even the user patterns differ. “From both we are targeting millions of potential users at a single instance. Moreover, as one may be aware, each radio or TV station or media organization will have millions of users, but they are local. However, by integrating with social networking sites across the countries, we may get the audience in millions and

much more than we get from the community blogging as the user base could be bigger and diverse in nature. User behaviors are also diverse in nature in both the categories," informs Singh.

Challenges in the Game

It is not an easy task to build an application, which should run on different operating systems (OS) when there are over six operating systems out there. "What was challenging was that we had taken every platform which is out there into consideration and write codes for them. Our team has to work extensively in the backend to support this entire social networking site as well," explains Singh. CellSpin has about 18-20 high-end servers sitting in the data centers along with Amazon servers that take care of activities of millions of CellSpin users. "Furthermore, we need to constantly upgrade our apps as well whenever there are updates in the OSes. This is the biggest challenge for us," he adds.

In addition, the company needs to keep pace with these networking sites by making necessary changes in our backend system and connecting with them so that there is no user interruption due to technical reasons. And adding new features to the application is another task CellSpin carries out in their labs. "Attending requests of integrating from diverse social networking sites from different countries and making this work on all those 400 plus versions of smartphones and non-smartphones is quite a demanding task," he explains.

The Road Ahead

For CellSpin it was indeed a challenging journey. Though the company initially started with the vision of becoming a leader in mobile blogging space, now it has evolved to provide mobile applications to the small and medium media companies by enabling them reach out to more people using CellSpinits technology. "A company may start with a vision; however, over a period of time a company should evolve to see what is the right thing to do, where the opportunity and money is, and what the strategic direction of the company should be," opines Singh. The privately held, angel funded company has been conferred the Top Mobile Application Award for 2008 by the leaders in mobile industry and was selected as one of the Top 10 companies to launch at DEMO 2008.

Going forward, with more than 400 million smartphones expected to be sold by 2010, the company is sitting on the gold mine of a huge market opportunity. Even in the emerging markets like India and China where 3G is set to roll out, it is creating novel opportunities in mobile space. With well-defined strategies, certainly there is a bright prospect for CellSpin to fulfil its aim to touch the sky of unlimited opportunities. Certainly, CellSpin is all set to become the leader in mobile social media services space that connects mobile consumers with their online social networks, personal blogs, photo storage sites, and their favorite community destinations like radios or TVs from the pint-sized gadget called cell phones!

Founded: 2006

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