

business

Directory startup makes direct connections

Boulder-based startup Search-to-Phone hooks up callers with multiple merchants that decide whether they can provide what the user wants

By Kimberly S. Johnson
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Search-To-Phone co-founders Carmin Turco, left, CEO, and Sebastian Replanski, the CTO, on Monday, November 5, 2007. Search-To-Phone is a personal search assistant, that could revolutionize directory assistance for phone users. (Post | Curtis McCrimmon)

Just seven months ago, Carmin Turco was living out of his car, his life hinging on refining his business plan and technology and being noticed

by the right people. Today, the co-founder of Search-to-Phone is working out of a Boulder office, flying around the country on sales leads and celebrating his company's first round of venture-capital investment.

Search-to-Phone has developed a virtual search assistant that connects users to merchants that can quickly meet their needs. Instead of combing through a print or online version of the phone book, Search-to-Phone lets users call a toll-free number and record a voice-mail message with their request. Users can also go through a website. The message is then simultaneously sent to all merchants in a geographic region that could potentially fulfill the request.

Instead of using directory assistance to search for a florist, for example, a customer can use Search-to-Phone to find a florist that can deliver six dozen roses within an hour.

"If you're a local business and you do 80 percent of your business by phone, when the phone rings that's gold," Turco said.

Callers give the city and state they're calling from and name a category to search. The caller is then prompted to leave a voice-mail message detailing the request.

"It records a consumer's specific needs, exactly like a voice mail, and takes that recording and broadcasts simultaneously to merchants in that area," Turco said.

When the merchant answers the phone, the

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message with the request is played. The merchant then chooses whether to accept the sales lead - for a fee of about \$1 - or refuse it.

The fee is worth it to immediately connect with a willing customer, said Jack Parsons, owner of a FastSigns franchise in Colorado Springs.

Although he has never used Search-to- Phone, Parsons said it's an interesting concept.

"Anything that gives small businesses a competitive edge is of value," he said. "There are some leads programs out there in which (business owners) pay \$5 for each qualified lead."

Users can either wait less than one minute while Search-to-Phone calls all local businesses with the message or leave a phone number where they can be reached.

Merchants never see the customer's phone number; they're connected by Search-to-Phone.

The three-person company is housed within Gold Systems, a Boulder-based provider of voice-recognition phone systems to companies.

Terry Gold, chief executive and co- founder of Gold Systems, served as a mentor to Turco and co-founder Sebastian Replanski when they were one of 10 TechStars companies incubated in Boulder over the summer.

"I was first attracted to the fact that these two guys have been at this for a number of years,"

Gold said. "This is a new way of doing search in a market that's radically changing."

Although the company has yet to sign any deals with major directory companies, "we're talking to everyone you can imagine," Turco said.

And the yellow-pages industry is listening as it is focused on using technology to extend its reach, said David Goddard, senior analyst and editor of the yellow-pages group for Simba Information, a Stamford, Conn.-based research company.

"The (yellow-pages industry) recognizes incredible opportunities exist with technology," Goddard said. "They made pretty good money with print versions and are doing better with technology."

While Search-to-Phone's goal is to integrate its system with print and online directory-assistance offerings available from companies such as Dex, the system is currently running using publicly available Internet Yellow Pages.

Merchants don't need to sign up with Search-to-Phone to use the network and be connected with customers.

One of Search-to-Phone's biggest challenges is educating merchants about the service when they receive a phone call and are played a voice-mail message. Currently, merchants hear information about how to use the service when they answer.

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"We've sent through about 8,000 search requests. About 10.5 percent (of merchants) take the request," Turco said.

The idea for Search-to-Phone began about three years ago when Turco operated an Internet marketing business in New York.

"It's all about how to deliver Internet traffic to phone people," Turco said. "If I could just say what I wanted, the Internet could bring it to me in the way I wanted it."

Last week, the company completed its first, angel round of venture-capital investment. The company wouldn't disclose the amount of money it received, saying only that it received cash from about seven private investors. The funding round was led by local tech entrepreneurs Brad Feld and Jared Polis.

"Carmin is a never-say-quit entrepreneur," said Feld, managing partner of Boulder-based Mobius Venture Capital. "He's got a big idea and huge determination."

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