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Krista LaRiviere and Chris Adams

gShift

Marketing

Serial entrepreneurs target the web search hit list

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For serial entrepreneurs, one business idea often leads to another. That's how it was for Krista LaRiviere and Chris Adams.

After launching cgk Technologies Group 12 years ago to do “everything Web,” from hosting to content management, they went on to spin off Hot Banana Software, which offers a web content management system integrated with analytics, e-mail marketing and customer relationship management.

They continued working for those companies for a couple of years after selling them in 2006 to Lyris Inc., of Emeryville, Calif. But, Ms. LaRiviere says, “like any serial entrepreneurs, we had to move on eventually.” And in their years in the web business, Ms. LaRiviere and Mr. Adams had concluded that

search-engine optimization – the art and science of getting search engines to show your website near the top of search results – needed to change.

So in 2009, they founded gShift Labs Inc.

Two years later, the Barrie, Ont.-based startup has 12 employees and about 225 customers. Recently, GrowthWorks Capital, a Vancouver-based venture capital firm, invested \$1.1 million in gShift, and the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario put in another \$500,000.

Search-engine optimization (SEO) had traditionally been the province of experts, says Ms. LaRiviere, now the company's chief executive officer. GShift set out to make it more accessible, "getting marketers to where they have control over their SEO campaigns."

At the same time, she says, social networking has changed the game. Getting better search rankings isn't just about tweaking website content and keywords, but also about using Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs and other techniques. And things change faster than before, so marketers need monitor their search placement daily rather than monthly.

For instance, major search engines now take a business's social networking activity into account in ranking its web pages, Ms. LaRiviere says. And the appearance of a keyword in certain kinds of content, such as a press release, has more impact than its appearance elsewhere.

GShift's Web Presence Optimizer tries to bring all this together in one place, with a dashboard to help its customers monitor how they're doing in terms of search results, plus recommendations and content development tools to help them do better.

Chief executive Marc Castel says it's working for his Toronto software company, Maintenance Assistant Inc. The five-year-old firm produces maintenance management software, he says, but it's a new generation of software – web-based, built to resemble today's social networking tools and designed to appeal to young, Web-savvy managers. So it makes sense that Maintenance Assistant's online presence is an important part of its marketing strategy.

Mr. Castel says he attended a gShift presentation and was struck by the company's assertion that most online sales come through "organic search," which means unpaid search results, rather than through paid search advertising. So he decided to focus on that rather than buying search advertising, and he acquired Web Presence Optimizer to help him do it.

The results are impressive, Mr. Castel says. When he focused his efforts on the search term CMMS (computerized maintenance management software), Maintenance Assistant quickly moved from somewhere past the 100th page of results on Google to the second item in the list. The company has improved its ranking in other searches as well, and Mr. Castel estimates he is saving about \$6,600 per month.

"We went from basically unknown, under the radar, to 'Oh my gosh, who are these guys and how did they get here so quickly?'" Mr. Castel says.

Ms. LaRiviere says the new investments will help gShift continue improving its software and ramp up its sales and marketing efforts.

Until recently, the company – relying initially on self-funding and money from Toronto technology incubator MaRS – has been proving its technology with around 150 paying beta customers. Most of

those are in the Toronto area, Ms. LaRiviere says, because that made it easier to give them the support required for the not yet fully developed software.

Now, gShift is moving ahead with a three-year product road map, elements of which include providing more detailed advice on what customers will need to do to achieve a given improvement in search rankings – something Ms. LaRiviere says even search engine optimization consultants have a hard time doing today.

GShift isn't yet profitable, but Ms. LaRiviere says the plan is to hit \$1-million in annual revenue and get into the black by the end of 2012.

Finding money to build gShift hasn't been as tough as some might think, she says. She attributes that in part to the track record that she and Mr. Adams – now gShift's chief technology officer – established through their two previous startups, and partly to being in a large market with a clear need for change.

Scott Pelton, vice-president of investments at GrowthWorks, describes that market as enormous. "Small and large firms all have a brand that they need to manage online through web presence optimization," he says. "Customers are won and lost based on social signals."

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