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Finding comparative success

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You might not immediately think blogging and having comedy aspirations would be the best credentials for launching a tech startup.

But you haven't met Brian Smith, comparison shopping site blogger/analyst and cofounder of SingleFeed, a Palo Alto company that helps businesses improve their rankings on comparison shopping sites.

Probe a little deeper and you find that Smith also has an economics degree from Columbia University and enthusiastic VC backing.

"He's the poster boy for growing a business from a blog," says data feed thought leader Rob Wight, president of Florida-based Channel Intelligence. "His independent reputation and personal skills are driving the business."

Thirty-one-year-old Smith claims a following of 40,000 readers a month (including many industry leaders) for his blog, **ComparisonEngines.com**, in which he critiques the services of shopping engines.

He has parlayed his straight-talking reputation there into the creation of SingleFeed, a low-cost self-service data feed management and submission company, and a companion site, **LoveYourFeed.com**, which focuses on data feed optimization. Both help online merchants efficiently submit their products with an eye toward ranking high on shopping engines like Shopzilla and **Shopping.com**.

Smith got hooked on the Internet as a student at Columbia and says he was empowered by internships at Web companies like CUC International (now Cendant Corp.) and **TheStreet.com** in the late '90s.

"They told me, 'go out and get more traffic'," he says. "They let me try new things and run with it."

Smith made enough money before the tech bubble burst to be able to pursue his big dream of acting, moving to San Francisco to study sketch comedy at the American Conservatory Theater. He then relocated to LA where he worked as a clown for six months, did some comedy work and consulted for Internet marketing companies to make ends meet. But after three years, he decided it was time to be practical.

"I could have made it in one more day... or 17 years," says Smith, who is charismatic but decided he wasn't going to join the ranks of his idol, Robin Williams, anytime soon. He was lured back east to join **WhenU.com**, a New York startup specializing in popup ads. But after seven months, he realized that wasn't for him, either.



Dennis G. Hendricks

"I'm an actor," says Brian Smith, founder of SingleFeed, a company that helps businesses improve rankings on comparison shopping sites "VCs invest in people; I have comedy and levity backed with brains and experience."

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"I got all the calls saying: 'I wanna come in and kill you'," laughs Smith, eyes wide, remembering conversations with Web surfers who hate pop-ups. "I needed a product where people evangelized for you, not wanted you dead."

In May 2005, while consulting in Internet marketing, he started his blog.

"I was the only guy talking about shopping comparison engines when Shopping.com was bought by eBay and Shopzilla by Scripps (SSP)," he says. "I stumbled upon a \$600 million industry no one was covering."

Soon magazines like Forbes were calling him up to ask for comment, and he became known as the "shopping search and data feed guy" -- still the title on his business card today.

Although many now want to wine and dine him and advertise on his blog, he's remained fiercely independent. He says he won't let search engine reps even buy him a beer and -- unsurprisingly -- says no to pop-up ads, although his recent launch --**loveyourfeed.com** -- does have a number of ads. He has a reputation for unbiased and irreverent opinion; and is even wacky at times. A recent blog describes some shopping search engines being "in the dark ages" and another reads: "Lack of transparency + fed up merchants + decreased traffic from Google and Google Base = Trouble with a capital T that rhymes with G and that stands for Google."

This wacky side is tempered by SingleFeed cofounder, Jeremy Horn, who worked with Smith at WhenU. He says the startup idea came out of a conversation they had two years before the company was founded, early 2006.

"He had the merchants asking for one thing and the search engines asking for the same thing," says Horn. "He asked me, can you create a product?"

The two formed a software service that streamlines the data submission process for merchants getting their product information on search engines like Shopzilla, Shopping.com, and Yahoo Shopping. Smith has leveraged his reputation to attract most major shopping search engines, as well as a growing roster of clients.

While the New York-based Horn manages a far-flung software team of five, he says, "Brian's the face of SingleFeed."

Yet the two founders work together on business development and Horn recalls a recent conference call with a comparison shopping service. "He spent 80 percent of the call being brutally honest about how bad their service was," says Horn. "He doesn't pull his punches." But they still got the business.

As for Smith's joke repertoire, Horn himself is blunt: "I'm still waiting for a good one," he says.

SingleFeed keeps its prices relatively low and focuses on small and medium merchants, charging a monthly fee of \$130 for servicing up to 10 search engines or \$10 for just GoogleBase (Google's own comparison shopping search service). Smith's goal is to grow his client list to over 1,000 this year (it's currently "in the hundreds") and expects to break even by year end. He estimates there are 250,000 small and medium U.S. merchants in his target range. And with 1-in-3 consumers going through shopping comparison engines during the holiday season, he argues the market opportunity is vast.

Nathan Decker, head of ecommerce for outdoor apparel merchant Evogear, says using SingleFeed saves him up to \$800 a month in personnel and management and helps bolster his ROI.

"What used to take 18 to 20 hours a week now takes 2-3 hours," he says. "Updating our product feed across eight different engines was a huge resource vacuum and SingleFeed has removed that constraint so I can focus on improving ROI rather than manual feed uploads."

Smith says making people laugh and smile is what drives him. "I'm doing half of that for my clients right now," he says.

But must he suppress his comedic side to do business and get funding in Silicon Valley?

"I'm an actor," says Smith. "VCs invest in people; I have comedy and levity backed with brains and experience."

This February, SingleFeed attracted investment from Palo Alto based True Ventures and NetService Ventures & Zvents; an amount he says is under \$1 million.

"Early stage investment is not a sexy business," says Jon Callaghan, general partner at True Ventures. "Success is never a straight line."

He says he looks for ego-less and passionate individuals like Smith, who have identified a significant business opportunity at an early stage. "The best ideas come from talented people seeing insights from within; the business-to-business market is underinvested."

He says with SingleFeed, they are focused on a four- to six-year investment horizon.

Industry thought leader Wight says SingleFeed faces competition from Merchant Advantage, Mercant and Channel Advisor but says that Smith offers more than just self-service tools. "Brian is one of the guys with the best pulse on the future of the industry," says Wight. "He also offers practical advice to clients for driving product business."

Smith says his focus on smaller businesses goes way back. As a youth, he worked at his family's pharmacy business, Syl-May Drugstores, in Stamford, Conn. But he saw the business (established by his immigrant grandfather) being taken over by bigger chains, and says that experience inspired him to concentrate on helping small and medium businesses succeed.

But ultimately Smith is still shopping for his big break in comedy.

"I'll be a romantic comedy star in five years," says Smith, all smiles and little jest.

Alison R.G. van Diggelen is a freelance writer based in San Jose.

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