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Doron Levin: AOL deal may fuel fortunes of Solid Speed

August 29, 2000

IBM VS. **Apple. America Online** vs. **Yahoo! Oracle** vs. **Ariba.**

The Internet has thrived on creative conflict among companies and technologies, the latest of which could decide who dominates how content is distributed over the Web.

In one corner is **Akamai Technologies**. The industry leader was cofounded at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a business plan authored by Birmingham native Randy Kaplan.

The newest challenger to Akamai is a consortium announced last week by AOL and **Inktomi**, whose software can also be used to route traffic over the Internet.

A start-up company based in downtown Ann Arbor, **Solid Speed Networks**, has a direct stake in the outcome. Founded only seven months ago, Solid Speed offers a service using Inktomi software that speeds up download times for Web sites and improves their reliability.

Anyone who has used the Internet quickly notices that some Web sites take a few moments to download.

Others, like Yahoo, seem to flash onto the screen

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instantaneously. The quicker the download, the more likely a visitor will stay, browse and perhaps buy.

"With load times of more than six seconds, there's a danger the person will leave," says Neil Dueweke, president and chief executive of Solid Speed.

Challenging the leader

Akamai seized leadership in content distribution nearly two years ago by creating software that places caches of content, such as Web pages, inside Internet service providers around the world. Thus a viewer who runs into a traffic jam at a busy site will be redirected quickly to a cache without realizing it.

Akamai's clients include Yahoo, **Lycos** and **CNN**, big, prestigious companies with ample money to turbocharge their Web sites.

The new consortium aims to attack Akamai's dominance by creating a network, Content Bridge, that links smaller content distribution companies to major networks of servers, where lots of Web sites reside.

By duplicating content across networks and assuming Web sites on the network sign up for Content Bridge, Web surfers could benefit from quick download speeds by always being near a cache.

Opportunity arises

Until now, only a handful of companies like Solid Speed had the temerity to test this business. Its premise has been to approach customers too small to interest Akamai.

But the new consortium presents an opportunity to expand far more rapidly. Could a strategic partnership be in the works?

"We're talking to Inktomi right now," says Dueweke, a seasoned high-tech alumnus of **Fanuc Robotics** and **Perceptron**, a process management

company.

So far Solid Speed has signed up 165 clients, though only 19 are paying. The company's pricing policy, based on the number of visitors, or hits, per month, could convert free clients into paying customers as they grow beyond 30,000 hits per month.

Any Web site that wants to test whether the service improves download time may do so free of charge, Dueweke says, by visiting www.solidspeed.com.

With 16 employees and initial venture capital funding of $2.2 million, Solid Speed has just begun seeking $15 million in a second round of venture capital financing.

The cash will fuel the battle to see who becomes, in Dueweke's words, "the 500-pound gorilla of content delivery."

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