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 Issue Date: June 15, 2008, Posted On: 6/18/2008

Snapfish gobbles up MeraSnap users

HP company continues growth as industry head

BY CHRIS NELSON

SAN FRANCISCO – The world's largest Web-based, digital-photo-processing service has just gotten a lot bigger. Snapfish by HP, the online photo venture launched at the height of the dot-com era and now owned by American IT giant Hewlett-Packard Co., has acquired all of the customers of MeraSnap.com, one of India's most popular photo-processing Web sites and a direct competitor to the Indian version of Snapfish. The two companies declined to reveal the purchase price.



Snapfish co-founder Bala Parthasarathy, left, and MeraSnap.com co-founder V.V. Kadam celebrate the recent deal. Photo courtesy of MeraSnap.com

San Francisco-based Snapfish has already begun to merge MeraSnap's customer base with its own India-specific Web site, a process that is expected to last through mid-August. Bala Parthasarathy, Snapfish co-founder and managing director of the company's Asia Pacific and Latin operations, said the acquisition of MeraSnap will boost Snapfish India's total membership to more than 300,000 people, an increase of more than 30 percent.

"This is an acquisition of MeraSnap's customers, and with the customers' consent, their pictures," Bala Parthasarathy, said. "The deal has been closed and we've been talking to them for several months. It is a friendly acquisition; it is not an acquisition of the company – just the member base."

He added MeraSnap's members shouldn't experience any problems during the transition, and that Snapfish won't move their pictures or other stored content to its India portal without their permission.

MeraSnap markets its services to casual digital-camera users, particularly those who want to send prints to their family members in India. Founded in 2005 by Indian entrepreneurs V.V. Kadam and Ravi Urs, MeraSnap is a subsidiary of Knowledgeworkz Consulting, a Bangalore-based IT-management firm that Kadam and Urs established in 2002.

Knowledgeworkz Consulting specializes in e-mail newsletter management and boasts an impressive client portfolio that includes Citibank India, Standard Chartered Bank India, HDFC Bank Ltd., Microsense Technologies Pvt. Ltd., Subhanu Consulting, a Bangalore-based IT-consulting firm; Orchid Hotels, a Mumbai-based luxury hotel group; and Real Soft Inc., a Cranbury, N.J.-based software developer.

Kadam currently serves as Knowledgeworkz Consulting's chief executive officer and Urs heads up the firm's technology and customer-delivery operations. Both men have chosen not to join Snapfish – Parthasarathy said they plan to "continue with other existing lines of business that MeraSnap is involved in" – but in a statement, Kadam and Urs expressed their admiration for Snapfish and its corporate parent, and predicted that MeraSnap's customers will benefit from their new affiliation with Snapfish.

"We are proud to be associated with HP Snapfish, the worldwide market leaders in the online photography space," Kadam and Urs said. "With HP's credibility backing Snapfish, our customers can be assured that their photographs are safe with the online portal for years to come. Moreover, our customers will get the opportunity to explore the enhanced services that Snapfish has to offer – ranging from personalized gifts to desktop calendars."

Snapfish is a relatively new arrival to the Indian market – the San Francisco-based company set up shop on the subcontinent in October 2007, yet it has grown rapidly, adding approximately 200,000 customers in just over six months. Parthasarathy, who in addition to managing Snapfish's Asia Pacific and Latin operations serves as head of Hewlett-Packard India Sales Pvt. Ltd., said the company is committed to growing in India and that MeraSnap is a major step in that direction.

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"Snapfish and HP are strongly committed to being the leader in India. The Indian photo-finishing market is very nascent but poised for explosive growth with the growth of broadband and mobile camera phones," he said. "We have been overwhelmed with the response from the media, blogs and other feedbacks [regarding the acquisition of MeraSnap], and most importantly, our customers."

Parthasarathy added MeraSnap customers who choose to join Snapfish will have access to a variety of services not offered by MeraSnap, including unlimited photo storage with Hewlett-Packard and the ability to order products in any of the more than 20 countries that Snapfish operates, have them manufactured in that country and shipped to a destination of their choice. For instance, a MeraSnap user in India who joins Snapfish will be able to order prints for a relative living in New York City, Snapfish would print the photos in the United States and then ship them to the intended recipient in New York, thus saving the customer a considerable amount of time and on the cost of shipping.

However, one perk that Snapfish India does not currently offer its members is print-to-location, or "offline services," which allow customers to print to brick-and-mortar businesses, such as retail stores. Parthasarathy said Snapfish does offer the service in other markets, such as the United States, and the company may extend this option to its Indian customers in the future – just not anytime soon.

A graduate of the Indian Institute of Technology Madras and the University of California, Parthasarathy co-founded Snapfish in April 2000. In April 2005, nearly five years to the day of its founding, Snapfish was acquired by Hewlett-Packard. Since then, the company's growth has exploded, from about 13 million members when the deal was announced in March 2005 to more than 50 million members today. Snapfish estimates that it adds 1 million new members per month and claims to have more than 2 billion unique photos stored on its servers.

"Several factors underpin the phenomenal growth of Snapfish in the United States," Parthasarathy said. "These include the fact that Snapfish's free online sharing and storage with an everyday low price [per photo] – now nine cents – resonates strongly with the users, the growth and affordability of broadband, growth of digital cameras at a steady clip and the acceptance of e-commerce in general."

"But it is very hard to compare the [United States] and India, as the dynamics are very different," Parthasarathy added. "The Indian market is very nascent right now, but we expect it to grow very strongly in the next three to five years."

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