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BY CHRISTY CAMPBELL

Back to the Roots

Alan Tien is helping businesspeople living abroad to stay connected with their families back at home.

It happens to most expatriates. They move away from their families, spread across the world, and start to lose touch with their friends, former coworkers and families. Luckily in this globalized age, the expanding range of Web 2.0 platforms is providing new tools for people to reconnect instantly through online phone services, instant messaging, emails and even video chatting.

Social networking sites – notably MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn – are exploding across the web. But, as Alan Tien points out, there was a huge gap when it came to connecting families. So in 2006, Tien and other former executives and employees of PayPal, Yahoo! Groups, Ebay and Tribe came together to develop an interface that appealed to two different audiences: those interested in mapping their genealogy and those who wanted to maintain connections, post pictures and keep in touch with family members. Geni.com was officially launched in West Hollywood, CA in January 2007 as a free online family tree service.

According to Geni, “Everyone’s related.” The best example of this point is a Dutch web developer who has expanded her family tree to 16,860 members, and growing, through the service. She has successfully tracked her lineage to: her great-grandfather’s third cousin’s daughter-in-law’s grandfather’s 30th great-uncle’s 28th great-granddaughter.

The advantage of Geni is that it allows family members to add other members, and those members to do the same, expanding the tree to in-laws, third cousins and great-great-great grandparents, rather than rely on an administrator to develop and maintain the family tree.

Now serving as Geni’s general manager for China, Tien is hoping to expand the company’s presence in the PRC. While the site is only available in English at the moment, Geni plans to add translation services as well as launch a localized Chinese site in the near future. Tien also pointed out that Geni is an excellent cross-cultural connector as over 60 percent of its users are internationally based.

Rather than advertise, Geni is relying on the viral aspect of its program to expand and self-promote its service, which has already gathered over 8 million profiles since its launch in January.

Alan Tien: “The expat community is a perfect group for this site. The expat family picks up, moves out to China and falls off the face of the map. How do you stay in touch with people? Sure, there’s email and the phone, but sometimes those still aren’t quite up to par. Geni is a much better way to communicate.

“Geni is great because communication with family is 10 times harder when you’re living in Shanghai than when you were living in the U.S. The U.S. is already pretty interesting because people are pretty distributed. So keeping in touch with family there is already a little challenging with time zones and crazy schedules. Trying to figure out [how to work around that] is challenging.”



Geni
www.geni.com

Target group: 30+ year olds

Top competitors:
www.family.com;
www.ancestry.com

Number of current profiles: 8 million

Largest family tree:
16,860 members

Based in:
West Hollywood,
California, U.S.

International offices:
One location in
Shanghai, China

User demographics:
Over 60 percent
internationally based