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## The Web at Work / Memetic Systems, Caesius Software

### **A Weekly Case Study**

**Web Maps:** Floyd McFeely is charting the Internet. On behalf of clients, his Seattle-based Memetic Systems Inc. ([www.memeticsystems.com](http://www.memeticsystems.com)) maps the contours of the net, searching for the hard-to-find nooks and crannies where "buzz" flourishes.

Memetic, a direct-marketing company, takes its name from the cyberword "meme," defined as a self-replicating packet of information, much like a gene.

Using "viral marketing" — known also as "referral" or word-of-mouth campaigns — Memetic hopes to "compel" customers not only to purchase the gizmo or service du jour, but also to spread the word about that product to acquaintances, family, and friends.

Memetic's clients include Compaq Computer Corp; an online gambling company and even a dot-com that converts digital images into coffee mugs. Also a client is New Line Cinema, the AOL Time Warner Inc. unit that is releasing "Lord of the Rings," the big fantasy film.

**Harvesting Targets:** Sending targeted e-mails to all the Tolkien junkies in so vast a place as the Internet isn't a simple matter. Hobbit lovers must first be "harvested." At first, Memetic hired a bevy of young student interns as harvesters. They used popular search engines such as Google to scour for leads, hunting on big commercial Web sites, bulletin boards and obscure personal home pages. Then they would cut and paste the relevant information onto spreadsheets — an inefficient and time-consuming process.

Some interns wasted time shopping, checking the news or pulling up sites that were irrelevant to the task at hand. "They had a tendency to drift off into oblivion" and miss deadlines, Mr. McFeely says — and a lot of important information simply slipped through the cracks. Dean Kimball, the chief technology officer, agrees: "They'd get kind of a glazed look after going through all that repetitive clicking and searching. They looked like employees in a Dilbert cartoon — little human robots."

**Terminal Eye Glaze:** When summer ended and the interns returned to college, Memetic had an even bigger problem: a labor shortage. So the company used its regular

employees, sometimes assigning \$70-an-hour workers and even senior management to the Web-crawling chain gang. There were few volunteers.

With its Web cartography business growing, Mr. Kimball estimated the company would need to dedicate 4,000 to 6,000 man-hours to the task next year. That wasn't viable. So Memetic needed to automate. But how? Mr. Kimball considered an in-house solution, but decided it would be too costly. Instead, the company turned to Caesius Software Inc., another Seattle start-up with a Web-harvesting tool called **WebQL** ([www.webql.com](http://www.webql.com)). The tool goes beyond standard search engines by not only locating and listing Web pages, but by also identifying and extracting the sought-after information — say a list of resumes or e-mail addresses — and presenting it in a useable format.

**Money and Time:** A task that took interns days can be performed in minutes with WebQL, Memetic executives say. The software, which cost roughly \$12,000, has cut labor costs by 95%. Next year, the savings could be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, Memetic says.

That isn't to say the new product is perfect. Effective use of the tool requires database skills, and Mr. Kimball is eager for Caesius's planned release of a more user-friendly version next year. But the plusses of WebQL outweigh the negatives, Memetic executives say. With its nearly instant response time, the tool allows Memetic to refine searches quickly and therefore devise more effective marketing strategies. Does Mr. McFeely miss the interns? Not really. In a time when profits are all important, he says, "they just add to the burn rate."

*—James Bandler*