

Idée's TinEye next frontier in Web searches

IMAGE RECOGNITION

Toronto startup
compares itself
to Google

BY DAVID GEORGE-COSH

Lurking inside a nondescript brick-lined building in a dilapidated Toronto neighbourhood may lie the next frontier for how we search for content online. Today, local tech startup **Idée Inc.** will publicly launch a search engine that its co-founders boldly say will do the same with images as what Google Inc. does with text.

"This is the early days of multimedia searching," said Leila Boujnane, the chief executive, in an interview inside the firm's trendy Toronto office. "It feels like we're at the same place Google was at years ago."

As search on the Internet fuels the demand for a richer and deeper Web, the ability to input visuals to yield better results than text is the quandary that such Web giants as Google and Microsoft Corp. are trying to figure out.

However, with a small, dedicated staff and several years of R&D work, Idée has managed to develop a set of algorithms that takes an image, compares it to about a half-billion indexed pictures, and returns a list of similar-looking pictures, along with their online URLs, within milliseconds.

"Anyone who actually sells content wants to know where it is," said Paul Bloore, Idée co-founder and chief technology officer. "No one else can do this, especially on the scale that we're doing."

The service, which is called TinEye, could be a blessing for publishers, brand marketers and copyright-compliance officers who want to track how products are being distributed on the Web. It also could be used by online retailers, which could

let customers snap a picture of an existing product and then instantly reveal similar products at comparative prices.

The release of TinEye is Idée's next step at becoming a powerhouse in the still-nascent image-recognition industry. Its existing service, which tracks down publishers who use copyrighted pictures and bills them accordingly, is used by about two dozen clients. The service brings in about \$15,000 to \$75,000 per client and is growing at a rate of about 10 new customers per month.

Monitizing TinEye is Idée's next step. Within the next month, the company has plans to roll out a paid-search revenue stream, affiliate fees for retailers that use the service to connect to customers and a corpor-

“For this type
of technology,
there's a lot of deep
pockets already

ate-subscription service.

The potential behind TinEye has led a number of venture capitalists to inquire about investing in the company, but they were rebuffed until now by Ms. Boujnane, who said she will begin looking for about \$10-million to \$12-million in funding for a small minority stake in the company.

"It has lots of business applications and I don't even think they've scratched the surface," said Rick Segal, a partner with private-equity firm JLA Ventures. "It's the kind of stuff that gets greedy little suits like me excited."

Competition in the sector is swift. A recent scientific paper delivered by two Google engineers at a Beijing Web conference this past month suggests the company is looking to improve its own image-recognition technology within its billion-dollar search engine. Riya, a Silicon Val-



PETER J. THOMPSON / NATIONAL POST

Leila Boujnane and Paul Bloore, co-founders of Idée, have produced a technology that could be a blessing for publishers and marketers.

ley startup that uses image recognition to direct customers to fashionable goods, was reported to have turned down a US\$40-million offer from Google in 2005 and is now rumoured to be worth at least five times that amount.

"For this kind of technology, there's a lot of deep pockets already," said George Goodall, a senior research analyst with Info-Tech Research Group.

"I think [Idée] has a one-year window of opportunity to build the technology. If they fail to execute on that strategy in the next eight months, they could get swallowed up."

Financial Post
dgeorgecosh@nationalpost.com

■ For more on how TinEye works and an interview with the Idée co-founders, check out the fpposted blog at financialpost.com