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Making A Raketu About Peer-to-Peer Voice And Everything Else

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New York startup plans to go Skype one - or two or three - better with Internet voice and other services.

Robert Poe on Dec 11th, 2006

Since everything cool these days seems to end with 2.0, it's tempting to describe Raketu as a sort of Skype 2.0. It's a peer-to-peer service that provides voice calling, messaging and other services over the Internet. But it goes a lot further than Skype, with plans to offer a triumvirate of services including communications, information and entertainment. It skillfully plays the viral and social networking angles, and claims to advance the state of peer-to-peer technology. But most of all, it's indisputably cool.

A venture-backed startup that launched in September, New York-based Raketu will kick off a big marketing and PR push in early 2007. The foundation of its service is peer-to-peer soft clients that currently run on Windows PCs, with Symbian, Windows Mobile and Macintosh versions coming soon. There have been 250,000 downloads of the client so far, according to founder and CEO Greg Parker.

The service particularly targets mobile users, but not just the kind who live their lives through their cellular handsets. It also aims at those who spend a lot of time at computers other than their own. By downloading the 3.4MB client to whatever machine they're using, such keyboard nomads can access all their contact and other information as if they were at home. They can also opt to eradicate said data when they leave the borrowed machine.

What makes Raketu's peer-to-peer technology so advanced, Parker claims, is that it doesn't rely on interim computers to transmit calls or other data streams, including video. That helps it avoid one of the biggest objections to Skype: its appropriation of users' computers and bandwidth to serve as so-called "super nodes" to forward calls that can't make it through firewalls and NAT setups on their own. Parker claims that Raketu's protocol, which like Skype's is proprietary and encrypted, has little trouble getting through such devices.

Given Parker's past as an astrophysicist, it's no surprise that Raketu's ambitions are expansive. (The name, incidentally, means "rocket" in Czech, and some development takes place in the Czech Republic.) First, it aims to simplify the messaging life by replacing all the major IM/VoIP clients with its own. "We wanted to remove the complexity of how people communicate with one another," says Parker. "So we addressed the core of applications and contact systems people have, AOL and Yahoo and MSN and all the messengers, and put all of that into one place and one environment or application."

Second, it wants to equal or better Skype as the Internet calling method of choice. Like Skype, it's currently offering outbound service, which it has given the rocking name of RakOut, for free — except that it has extended the promotion to 42 countries, rather than just to North America as Skype has.

It's also competing hard elsewhere. "Our rates for the [countries] that aren't free are extremely competitive, lower than Skype's in every case, and as low as virtually anyone out there," Parker says. Like its competitors, it's also counting on an inbound service, naturally called RakIn, as a key revenue source. Currently Raketu hands off its outbound calls to international carriers for overseas delivery, although in the future it will have local nodes with VoIP gateways in selected countries, according to Parker.

Third, Raketu wants to go where no Internet phone service has gone before. Because the voice service works over links as thin as 36Kbps, it will be accessible to the 70 percent of Internet users in the world that Parker notes are still using dial-up connections. It can also run over ordinary cellular data links, which Parker says may in real-world operation be as slow as 30Kbps to 40Kbps, rather than requiring pricey 3G plans. That vastly increases the number of mobile phone users it can attract.

Altogether, Raketu plans to offer a comprehensive menu of services, including voice and video calls, voice mail, conference calling, file transfer, e-mail, and multiple messaging methods, as well as the latest manifestation of cool, social networking apps. Already, in fact, online dating is proving one of the service's most popular features, according to Parker.

But person-to-person communication is just the launch pad for Raketu's long-term ambitions. A second major component, integrated into the main application, will be information services. Parker reels off a list of things Raketu users will be able to access, including news, weather, and delayed stock quotes with alerts; search capabilities to find information about health issues, movies, recipes, restaurants and the like; and travel services for finding and booking flights, hotels and cars.

The third integrated component, entertainment, will turn the Raketu platform into a multimedia player that makes it possible to play streaming or local audio or video content, and includes a karaoke feature that allows users to sing as they watch. Raketu also plans to build out a back-end multimedia content delivery infrastructure that will expand the revenue opportunities far beyond inbound and outbound VoIP calling. "We'll be announcing VOD partners and IPTV streaming pieces, and that'll be on a subscription basis," says Parker. Another potential use for the infrastructure is to provide the real-time communications component for online multiplayer gaming companies, he adds.

Even thinking about offering streaming video, however, moves Raketu towards territory the major cellular carriers have been targeting for some time. And that raises the broader question of whether it's better to try to partner with big service providers, both to gain access to their customers bases and to avoid getting crushed by them.

The issue is not so pressing in Asia and Europe, according to Parker. "People there buy the phones and take them to a service provider and buy the services they want, and add the software they want," he says. "That model is obviously ideal for us. We don't need to partner with anybody, we just need to make the downloads available." In the U.S., however, it's a potential concern. "We would prefer to be with a large carrier in North America," he admits. "In the rest of the world that makes no sense for us."

Either way, Parker claims the real opportunity will come when WiMAX becomes widely deployed. "That's going to change the whole environment of communications," he says. "That's where we'll see the real takeoff of mobile VoIP in a big way, as well as video and other services. And that's what we're poised to be a part of."

To help build its consumer takeup, Raketu is pushing that other ultra-cool technique: viral marketing. Since the value of a peer-to-peer service increases exponentially with the number of people using it, users have a natural incentive to sign up their friends. Raketu is adding a financial incentive as well: Users receive a percentage of the revenue from any paid services those friends use. That turns every user into a paid sales agent. "We made it dead simple to use," explains Parker. "Basically you are a qualified affiliate as soon as you're a Raketu user."

On a more down-to-earth level, Parker says a number of small businesses in North America have expressed interest in using Raketu's voice services to cut the cost of calls between branch offices. "We can do that in a hosted environment," he notes. "Optionally, they can have it as a separated environment, not in with the Raketu public. They can be on own servers, it's easy for us to deploy that way." In addition, at least two large corporations have expressed interest in licensing Raketu's technology for internal use to connect their 20,000 global employees. "But that's in the future, it's not a source of revenue today," Parker adds.

All of this being new technology, of course, it's impossible to predict how it'll perform in the real world, given the myriad possible combinations of platforms, connection speeds, and service requirements. In fact, if it works well

in all the ways Raketu envisions, it'll be something like a car that gets 60 miles per gallon, carries 10 passengers, and does 200 miles per hour. Sounds unlikely, but then again, the auto industry doesn't have Moore's Law — much less an astrophysicist with a degree in computer science — on its side.

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This is one great software I've been using in the past several years. In my opinion, Raketu integrates everything Skype has to offer, plus all the others from Jajah—a leading web-based platform. Besides all that, it gives me free