

TECHNOLOGY

Mobile device users get the full Web picture with Israel's InfoGin

By David Brinn December 24, 2006

Eran Wyler had a vision six years ago, and thanks to his determination to see that vision through, the world of Web to Mobile content will never be the same.

Getting your favorite websites on your mobile device can be an act of frustration - the sites are often reformatted in an unfamiliar manner, it's graphically unappealing, and difficult to maneuver in the manner you're used to on your PC. The technological platform Wyler and his Israeli company InfoGin developed automatically adapts Web pages for mobile screens to make it easy for consumers to navigate the Web and find anything they need, using their mobile device

Just ask America Online. AOL uses InfoGin's Intelligent Mobile Platform to power the mobile AOL search services, including their new mobile browsing service. InfoGin's technology enables the optimal reformatting of Web content to any mobile device, without compromising the Web's richness or the device functionality. And according to Wyler, for the end user, that means an Internet session on your mobile device that most closely resembles sitting in front of your laptop or PC.

"We have made surfing the Internet on a mobile phone a reality and are developing partnerships with leading global mobile operators in order to share this success with consumers around the world," said Wyler.

"In the end of the day, users like to go to Internet on mobile devices as long as it looks great, is easy to navigate, and is functional," he told ISRAEL21c. "Then they'll use the Internet on the mobile because users look for content they are familiar with."

Wyler has over fifteen years of experience in designing, developing and managing state-of-the-art hardware and software technologies for leading Israeli companies, including ECI Telecom and Orad Hi-Tec Systems, where he was responsible for developing flat screen technology (GLPD), display systems, picture processing mechanisms, video cards, video compression and high bandwidth chips (ASIC). But he says his greatest learning experience occurred while carrying out his duties as a researcher and developer in the Israel Defense Forces.

"I served in the Israeli Intelligence Force for more than four years in the early 1990s in an elite R&D unit as a hardware & software developer. I tell you, it's the greatest university of all," he said. "You could say I'm a computer geek - or freak. I witnessed the whole computer revolution from the beginning - and was involved in programming and building computers. I was on the Internet at the beginning, before most people had heard of it."

Around the turn of the century, after making his mark at the aforementioned companies, Wyler had developed a basic idea for a company he wanted to start which answered the following questions - can a machine analyze a Web page automatically without human

involvement and 'understand' the meaning of the various sections in the page? (ie. What is the main issue? What part will be the navigation bar? What image represents the page logo?).

"Around this time, it was all about the WAP (wireless application protocol) phase - and operators had started to build basic applications for mobiles. I didn't understand why they were spending so much energy into building so many WAP applications, when it all existed on the Internet already," he said. "I thought the focus should be on really coming up with a conversion process from the Internet to mobile - there's no need to reinvent the web."

Established in April, 2000, the Kfar Saba-based InfoGin began to implement Wyler's ideas, but met resistance from both mobile operators and venture capital investors, a resistance which nearly destroyed the fledgling company.

"Operators told me that the demand and behavior of the end mobile user is different from the computer user. 'If you're browsing for content on your mobile, you want to get a summary of the news, not the whole thing' they said. But as I saw it, they had simply developed a bad theory around their philosophical ideas which I couldn't understand or agree with," he said.

"Looking back at the last 6 and a half years, I can say that the first 4 and half were a really tough - a struggle to survive, both philosophically and financially. The operators didn't believe there was a real reason or demand for such a device, and the VC community didn't want to invest. It was really hard," Wyler said.

He recalls gathering his staff in the lean years and telling them their main goal was to survive, and that one day, the strategy and views of the mobile community will change.

"I thank God for giving me the strength and patience - I can now say that the change is unbelievable. The whole industry is moving toward our vision, whether you're talking about Google, Yahoo, AOL, or Microsoft."

Today, InfoGin has over 50 employees and among its clients are AIS, the largest mobile operator in Thailand, KPN, the largest mobile operator in Netherlands, Cellcom and Pelephone in Israel, AOL and Infospace in the US.

"Our platform enables users to go to any website, and in real time, the site will be optimally fitted to the device," said Wyler.

"Our uniqueness comes from our point of view that in order to take content from a large screen display to a small screen display, you need to have an understanding of the visual aspect. Before we convert the markup language from HTML, we first try to understand the various elements on the page and present it in a human approach, and not in a mechanical approach. With two clicks, a user should be able to go from the CNN homepage into the sports section just like they can do at home."

Wyler knew that InfoGin's platform had won over the hearts and minds of content providers when US media giant AOL gave a vote of confidence by signing up the company to adapt its content for mobile.

"We met with some of the top people at AOL from the City guide group and I asked them how long it would take them to adapt their existing content to the mobile. They said about six to eight months, and it would be a light version not the full PC version. I said, how about seeing it up and running tomorrow?"

"They thought I was kidding. But the next day, they saw much more than what they thought they'd see if they had waited eight months. They kept bringing in more and more devices and checking if it worked on all of them. They were amazed at how fast we were able to take their content to mobile without interfering with their work or writing new code, or having access to their database," said Wyler.

According to senior VP of Products for AOL's wireless group Eric Engstrom, InfoGin's solution enables the communication giant to quickly meet rising consumer demand for mobile search and browsing services.

"We're pleased to expand on our relationship with InfoGin to make it easier than ever for mobile users to access their favorite Web sites and services on the go." he said.

InfoGin received more accolades earlier this year when it received the Customer Value Enhancement (CVE) Award from the Frost & Sullivan analyst house that recognizes innovative companies delivering strategies that significantly improve customer interaction and contribute to customer satisfaction. The company was cited for its 'technological breakthrough in enabling unlimited Internet content and facilitating rapid content adaptation for 'seamless transference' of PC to mobile Internet surfing experiences'.

For Wyler, it's sweet vindication for his vision of rich Internet content on mobile devices, but he claims the struggle is not over yet.

"Today, even the most prestigious content provider narrows their creativity when they develop their mobile version. Why? They think about reaching more and more devices, and need to write content to mobile that's not so sophisticated or nicely presented - mainly text and small images. The problem is the end user doesn't like it - mainly because they're used to something else on their computers. The end result is a poor user experience."

"What we said is that you need to write content once and concentrate on how the content can be the most attractive and creative as possible. Then our platform will dynamically and automatically adapt the content to the device - the end result - rich device, rich content. Let the content provider focus on what they are good at - creativity and how the content will attract the end user. The rest is our part."

Wyler is quick to use the word 'our' when describing InfoGin's accomplishments and he praises the company's employees who persevered when times were tough.

"Even in the worst days, when we weren't sure we had money to survive, in the fridge, there were always snacks and soft drinks. I think we have a unique culture at InfoGin. People are really proud of the product we've developed and also for the company we've become. It's a story not only about technology but about people, how we succeeded in going through hard times, stayed together and overcame those challenges."