

Yang and Yun and Become.Com

By **Jim Hedger**, StepForth News Editor, [StepForth Placement Inc.](#)

[Michael Yang](#) and [Yeogirl Yun](#) are two of the most interesting entrepreneurial engineers in the business of search. Representing the business brains and intellectual brawn behind the vertical shopping search engine Become.com, both Yang and Yun have storied histories in the industry. In April 1998 the duo conceived and developed the original comparison shopping site, mySimon.com, selling it to CNet two years later for \$700M. The results of their unique partnership have shaped the Web as we know it today, effecting popular properties such as WiseNut, LookSmart and a huge chunk of the immense Korean Internet market. Somehow, both found the time to earn multiple university degrees, participate in international economic development efforts and, in the case of Yang, acquire a third-degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do. Yesterday, they graciously found the time to speak with StepForth News.

Earlier this year, Yang and Yun introduced what is arguably the most interesting vertical search engine, Become.com. Merging their experiences of the past with what they both passionately believe to be the future of search, along with \$7.2 million in new venture capital funding, Yang and Yun find themselves sitting atop a tool that could conceivably be the most comprehensive shopping mall ever constructed. Become.com is a vertical search engine, which means it focuses on one specific topic area, in this case, shopping.

One of the reasons Become.com is so interesting is that it is one of the few shopping search engines that uses a spider to populate its database and an algorithm to sort it. Active for just over a year, the BecomeBot has found and spidered over 3.2Billion shopping related documents. Once in the database, these documents are run through Yun's Affinity Indexing Ranking algorithm known by its acronym AIR.

While working on the same basic principles shared by most, if not all algorithmic search engines, AIR has been erroneously compared with Google's [Hilltop](#) algorithm and other [Kleinberg](#) derived algos. Yun, who is generally very informative and friendly said, "AIR is fundamentally different than from Google. AIR is based on principles of engineering and physics and was specifically designed for vertical sorting."

Unfortunately, that's about all he was going to say about the algorithm, partly because he and lead programmer Jon Glick have a few more tricks up their sleeves partly because Yun and Yang wish to protect their competitive advantage as long as they possibly can. A component of their competitiveness will be the unveiling of a comparison shopping tool in the early summer allowing consumers to examine similar products based on several unique criteria.

Having any competitive advantage in the vertical search shopping market is important not only to growth but to survival. Current market leader, Shopping.Com was purchased by EBay last Wednesday for approximately \$620Million. The first shopping assistance tool Yang and Yun built, mySimon.com also enjoys considerable popularity as a CNet property. Being the new kid on the block in a market that is dominated by properties owned and operated by EBay and CNet, Become.Com plans to out-market and, within three years, out-sell its larger rivals.

Other features have recently been added to Become's otherwise sparse homepage interface. The most noticeable is a search-term suggestion tool that appears below the search query box. As a searcher types in keywords, the suggestion tool lists over a dozen possible words describing the product or service the searcher might be looking for. Suggestions change as the searcher enters more letters to complete the word or phrase they are searching for. Another recently added feature is a spell-checking tool that can help users find the correct spelling of a company or product name.

Yang sees the purchase of Shopping.com by EBay as a beneficial development. "The EBay purchase is good for Become because it pushes the idea of shopping search into the mainstream", he said. Yang sees the vertical search sector becoming even more competitive as other firms move into the market however he feels Become's technology will carry it above and beyond its rivals and exceed visitor's expectations. Over the next few months, users will notice subtle changes to the front page interface as Become starts to look for and include sites from around the world. Yang and Yun hope to provide a full international shopping service by next year; currently it only supports shopping sites in the United States. Users might also notice an increase in personalized services as Become starts to anticipate their shopping or searching needs. One of the nifty personalized tools will be an automatic alerting system that direct users to products or services they are interested in as they are found in Become's database.

Webmasters and SEOs will be interested in learning more about the AIR algorithm and how it works. From our examination and information we were able to glean from our conversation with Yun and Yang, it would appear that like Google, Become is highly influenced by links. A major difference between the two is Become's ability to apply far stricter link-relevancy measures than its more mainstream cousin. Become values links from authority sites above all others. An example Yun offered involved an online camera sales site with a link from a photography magazine. To add another dimension to the way Become judges links is the intent of the site owner in placing links leaving his or her site. Become performs a relevancy test on all links associated with a site, both incoming and outgoing. Another factor in Become listings involves minor human intervention. As the BecomeBot spider pulls listings from around the web based on links it has followed, there are times when a human eye is better at spotting authority sites related to shopping. A small group of human reviewers look at sites as they are brought into the database to help the algorithm determine which could be considered authorities and which shouldn't. Yun suggested clear link paths though a site and obtaining links from relevant sites with very strong reputations, along with product focused content as the easiest way to achieve strong placements in Become's listings.

Yang and Yun are in a great position today. They have just achieved another \$7.2 million in venture capital funding and have long-term plans on how to best use it. Their spending plans rest on four main pillars. They are investing in improved technology which will yield new features and applications to make their shopping search stronger. The first of the major new features will be the comparison shopping engine to be released early this summer. Once that component is complete, Become plans an intense branding and marketing campaign. Before they can market their brand however, they need to fill a few key positions.

Become is going on a hiring spree and is looking to add a few Vice Presidents to its management table. Become is looking for a strong VP of Marketing, a VP of Sales Development, a VP in charge of Syndication, and a VP in charge of Merchant Sales. They have ten other [positions open](#) at this time and are hoping to fill them by the end of the summer. By the end of the year, Become.Com hopes to be a household name in the upwardly mobile world of vertical search.