VENDOR PROFILE

Ficstar: Simplifying Web Data Extraction

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IDC OPINION

Information workers are under increasing pressure to make better decisions and be more productive, despite the overwhelming amount of information they are faced with. Solutions are needed to help organizations and their employees harness their information for better, faster decision-making, but traditional approaches are falling short. Manual "cut and paste" methods are time consuming and prone to human error, development of homegrown tools require skill and investment of resources to maintain. Third party tools are available, but may not always meet the exact needs of customers.

Ficstar has launched its Web crawling technology to help users locate and capture information from target sites, and automatically transform it into text, Excel, or a database format to help users make better decisions.

Based on an analysis of Ficstar, IDC believes the company's solution:

- ☑ **Addresses an increasing need in the market.** Search and discovery technologies promise to help organizations drive greater value from the overwhelming amount of information they are faced with, driving forward a healthy market opportunity.

- ☑ **Has potential to deliver improved accuracy, speed and productivity.** Automated data extraction and storage improves accuracy, scope, and speed, saving organizations and employees resources and time compared to manual processes.

- ☑ **Demonstrated results with brand names.** The company has worked with over 20 customers, including some large brand names such as NASA, Workopolis, IKEA Saudi Arabia, Carfax, and a large Canadian retailer that Ficstar can leverage to increase its visibility and credibility in the market.

IN THIS VENDOR PROFILE

In this study, sponsored by Ficstar, IDC provides insight into the company's automated Web data extraction and data mining solution. IDC studies the capabilities and applications of Ficstar's solution, the size and trends of the market it is addressing, and the company's challenges and opportunities for growth. All currency figures in this document are in Canadian dollars unless otherwise stated.

SITUATION OVERVIEW

Company Overview

Ficstar is a Toronto-headquartered software vendor offering Web data extraction and data mining solutions. Founded in 2005, the company differentiates itself as offering a Web data extraction solution that can be configured and deployed quickly, and that can work on AJAX and script-based Websites. Ficstar's custom-designed Web crawlers are intended to be seamlessly integrated with customers' existing systems.

Technology/Solution

Web Grabber is Ficstar's flagship product, an automated Web extraction solution that can be used for ecommerce, contacts, Web extraction, and Web crawling (see Figure 1). The solution is a Windows-executable application and integrates with a users default Web browser. The browsing process is fully automated and through pre-set data extraction configuration, can navigate target Websites for both dynamic and static content. Collected data is transformed into the format of the user's choice – CSV, Text, Excel, SQL, Local or remote databases.

Ficstar also offers the following add-on tools:

- **Website Keyword Monitor –** Tracks and captures changes to target Web sites, modifications to text, meta tags, keywords, page layouts, dates and times of posted content.

- **Search Engine Ranking Tracker –** Monitors rankings in search engines and directors and the results of pay per click campaign efforts.

- **Web Browsing Automator –** Automates data entry, data synchronization, form completion and submission, and order entry.

- **Web Grabber .Net –** Built on .Net 2.0/3.0 architecture, this Web data extraction tool scrapes data from script intensive or frame-based pages.

FIGURE 1

Ficstar's Web Crawling Process
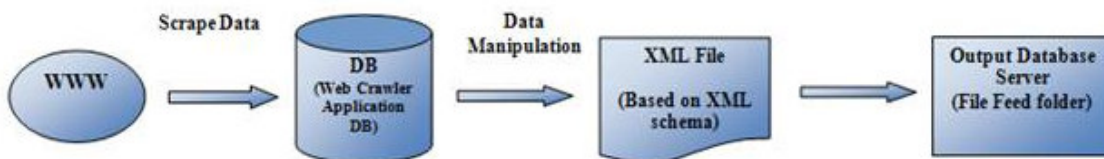
Source: Ficstar, 2010

The solution is designed to improve efficiency and reduce expenses in business intelligence, competitive analysis, Web crawling automation and data mining, and eBusiness and ecommerce system development. Some examples of how Ficstar's customers have used the technology are as follows:

- ☒ NASA has been using Ficstar Web Grabber for four years to trace patent related information online.

- ☒ A leading e-commerce company has been using Ficstar Web Grabber for three years, tracing price changes for more than 30,000 products from about 50 competitor Websites.

- ☒ A large Canadian Retailer is contracting with Ficstar for competitor price monitoring service. After an initial six-month trial testing period, the product could be deployed to provide actionable pricing recommendations for all its products based on competitive price changes.

- ☒ Workopolis.com is using a custom-designed Web Grabber provided by Ficstar to transfer job postings directly from corporate customer Websites to its own database. Any new job posted on client Websites will be automatically transferred to the Workopolis Website with the same format and layout as shown on the original Websites.

- ☒ Ficstar provided a custom Web Grabber program for IKEA Saudi Arabia to collect product information from the main corporate Website of IKEA Sweden. Web Grabber's design makes it possible for the program to go through the internal VPN connection protocol and fetch data from the corporate Website protected by advanced Internet connection security technology.

Market Opportunity

Market Trends

Ficstar's solution addresses the search and discovery market, a US $2.1 billion market as of 2009, which is expected to see modest but accelerated growth over the next five years.

A number of trends are impacting the search and discovery market:

Search-based technologies are seeing applications in many functional areas of the business, and are increasingly more targeted. Litigation and eDiscovery applications have shown significant adoption and growth to date, as have social media monitoring, fraud detection, intelligence and research, ecommerce recommendations and navigation, search marketing and ad matching, mobile/geosearch and other emerging application areas. Companies that position themselves to address one of these focused solutions will have an easier time gaining awareness for their area of expertise. Ficstar is capable of addressing these growing market areas, and would be well suited to focus in on some of these core areas to help differentiate itself in the market.

Windows 32 and 64-based solutions remain the largest market opportunity for search and discovery software, although Linux/other open source solutions will be the leader in the market in the next five years, with Microsoft in the number 2 position.

The emergence of rich media is also driving the emergence of a next-generation approach for supporting search and discovery of this content. Ficstar's solution can perform data extraction jobs on HTML based page content for music, videos and pictures. As the company grows, partnering with those companies that have expertise in areas such as new media search and image identification could help expand Ficstar's value as new media becomes more prevalent on the Web.

Pricing pressure continues largely due to enterprise pricing strategies from the likes of Microsoft, Google and Oracle which have reduced the unit cost of search; the growth of SaaS models; and the rapid proliferation of open source and packaged open source alternatives. Ficstar is addressing pricing pressure through the intended launch of its own SaaS-based pricing model to deliver a more standardized solution that is lower in cost and requires less customization.

Strategy and Success to Date

Go-to-Market Strategy

While Ficstar has positioned its Web crawling technology as having the potential to help a variety of vertical markets, the company has seen particular interest from e-commerce, real estate, travel and insurance firms.

Today, Ficstar's business model is premised on customization, with a monthly data extraction fee. In an attempt to streamline workflow and service delivery, the company plans to segment clients by offering a standard platform (SaaS) solution for as low as $50 a month which requires less customization and is more of a do-it-yourself option. The fully customized enterprise option will be available as well for more complex projects.

About 95% of the company's business is sold direct today, with the intention of moving toward a greater portion of its business coming through the channel via value added resellers.

Partners

Ficstar has established a key alliance with U.K. based reseller Intoscape to expand its e-commerce price monitoring solution to the European market. Ficstar continues to seek reseller partners to expand its presence abroad.

Geographic Reach

Around 70% of the company's business is from the U.S., 5-10% from Canada, and the remainder from the U.K. and other European countries such as the Netherlands. By expanding is reseller relationships, the company expects those distributions to include a larger proportion of sales from outside North America.

FUTURE OUTLOOK

Challenges and Opportunities

Ficstar has an ambitious product development strategy. As it expands its capabilities, the company will face many opportunities and challenges:

Challenges

☐ **Communicating unique value**. There are a number of other vendors in the market delivering similar solutions, including Kapow Technologies, QL2, Mozenda, and Fetch Technologies. There are also a number of vendors in this space that are focused on social media monitoring, including Radian 6, DNA 13 and Sysomos, and that would compete indirectly with Ficstar. With many vendors looking to benefit from market growth in this sector, Ficstar will need to clearly position and focus itself in the market to help customers understand the value it delivers.

☐ **Scalability.** Customization is required by Ficstar's consultants each time it delivers a solution to its clients, which is resource intensive for a small firm. The company is now looking to roll out a more standardized SaaS solution to streamline delivery, and reduce costs to customers.

Opportunities

☐ **Demonstrated results with brand names.** The company has worked with over 20 customers, including some large brand names such as NASA, Workopolis, IKEA Saudi Arabia, Carfax, and a large Canadian retailer that the company can leverage to increase its visibility and credibility in the market.

☐ **Addressing a healthy market that will continue to see demand.** Search and discovery technologies promise to help organizations drive greater value out of structured and unstructured information so that employees can make faster and better business decisions, helping to drive this market forward.

☐ **Broaden new media support.** With the increasing number of videos, audio and pictures on the Web, Ficstar would be well positioned to expand its support for this Web content. The solution today performs data extraction jobs on HTML based page content, but as the company grows, partnering with those companies that have expertise in new media search and image identification could help expand Ficstar's value as new media becomes more prevalent on the Web.

LEARN MORE

Definition

Search and Discovery Software: Applications that create access to unstructured and structured information and data. This group of software applications analyzes, tags, and searches text – often in multiple languages – and rich media such as audio, video, and image files. This market includes search platforms, search engines,

question-answering applications, categorization/metadata tagging tools, categorizers and clustering engines, visualization tools for information navigation and analysis, filtering and altering tools and a broad range of text analytics components and applications. The major search and discovery submarkets are:

- Search engine, platforms and applications

- Text mining and text analytics

- Categorizers and clustering engines

- Question answering

- Language analyzers

- Rich media search

Related Research

*Worldwide Search and Discovery Software 2010-2014 Forecast (*IDC # 222715, April 2010)

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