

Genealogy Web site gets swamped by searchers

Mormons upgrading
to meet demand

By Bob Mims
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SALT LAKE CITY, Utah—Staggered by a tidal wave of would-be users, the Mormon Church's new Internet genealogy site has been forced to undergo a series of major programming and hardware upgrades less than a week into its launch.

"On Thursday, fewer than half of an estimated 1 million people trying to reach FamilySearch, www.familysearch.org, on the World Wide Web were able to get through. LavaStorm, the Boston-based developer of the service, reported that in addition to the 40 million hits being recorded at the site, users representing another 60 million hits were failing to connect.

"And that's just an estimate," said Matt Romney, LavaStorm marketing director. "We haven't really seen this thing hit its potential."

Just how popular FamilySearch has proven to be is difficult to gauge. Internet leaders, such as America Online, Microsoft and Yahoo!, use varying measures of their traffic.

However, by comparing counts reported by Media Matrix, an online Internet statistics service, with its bit figures, LavaStorm contends FamilySearch already is at least among the top 10 most popular Web sites.

AOL serves roughly 1.5 million users per day, followed closely by Microsoft. Yahoo! is third with just more than 1 million, about the same number of potential users LavaStorm estimates for FamilySearch.

Even at the current 400,000 users per day, the genealogy site, which offers nearly 400 million family history files with plans to add hundreds of millions more, would come in around No. 5, ahead of Go Network, Romney said.

When unveiled Monday, FamilySearch administrators had expected the free site would draw no more than 25 million hits per day. However, servers hosted by IBM in the Chicago suburb of Schaumburg, Ill., soon were closing in on 40 million hits, or roughly 400,000 users, on the first day. Overwhelmed, the site was effectively off-line for hours as its Internet capacity was shored up.

IBM technicians on Thursday were working to add server computers and increase the volume threshold, said Michael Parry, spokesman for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Meanwhile, LavaStorm added a "rotation" subprogram to help funnel excess users. It informs browsers that FamilySearch is at capacity and gives the number of minutes they must wait to connect to the site.

Romney said the online filtering scheme was a stop-gap measure until the site's capacity is upgraded and software enhancements made.

"We didn't expect that there would be this much excitement and traffic so early on," he said. "The good news is that the site was built to be scalable. That means while it was first built with 25 million hits in mind, it can handle much more than that; it's scalable up to the hundreds of millions."

If Romney and LavaStorm were surprised, the church was stunned.

"We've rarely seen anything like this with a site launch on the Internet," said Randy Bryson, director of FamilySearch. "We and our technology partners are doing everything possible to help people have a good experience logging on to this site."

Whether the demand will continue to be so high is unknown.

"I would think it will just continue to grow," Romney said. "As long as the church is willing to make the investment to do that, there should be no problem."

Neither LavaStorm nor the church will say how much the site cost to develop. However, Romney said that his company charges \$1.5 million to develop an average Web site and that FamilySearch had proven more of a challenge than most contracts.