

Devicescape Enters Wi-Fi Location Business

By Glenn Fleishman

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Devicescape will offer SoftGPS, another way for device makers to obtain coordinates for mobile equipment on the go, GPS or no: I've written before that Devicescape and Skyhook Wireless are two of my favorite companies in the back-end Wi-Fi space because what they do is so clever. Both have been around for years; both are seeing the payoff for consistently working towards intelligible goals. And both rely on their software or data being used by other firms.

Of course, they're now in competition for some of the location services dollars. It makes sense. Skyhook Wireless bootstrapped itself into the Wi-Fi positioning business through brute force driving. It still uses driving as a primary component in how it provides fairly precise latitude and longitude based on an analysis of Wi-Fi network IDs and the corresponding signal strength around a device.

But Skyhook also gathers data, massive massive amounts of data, from mobile devices, largely smartphones. Each time a smartphone snapshots a network environment and sends that information to Skyhook, the company not only replies with GPS-like data, but it adds the collected information into its databases to refine, update, or expand its knowledge.

Devicescape thus finds itself in a similar footing. Without having fleets of wardriving trucks, Devicescape does have its software installed in millions of devices worldwide, and gathers the same kind of snapshots. The company has also collected the information and positions of millions of hotspots. This information put together leads inexorably to the desire to make money off it. You don't collect a billion (or 10 billion?) pieces of such information without wanting it to generate some cash in return.

The demand for location services is extremely high now that the pieces are in place by many content providers to deliver general and specialized information relating to where you're precisely standing. That ranges across simple mapping, navigation and directions, advertising, yellow page-like business data, and augmented reality (where information is overlaid on a live video stream of your surroundings, for instance).

While the focus has been on smartphones and other cellular devices, that may be misplaced. In most such devices, GPS (and, most of the time, Assisted GPS) provides primary information with Wi-Fi and cellular triangulation a secondary or supplementary factor.

But what about the thousands of current and future mobile doodads that won't have a GPS chip, but for which location is a useful component? That's where Devicescape and Skyhook will contend. And Devicescape has an advantage there.

Devicescape has relationships with many hotspot networks and the software that allows authentication to free and open networks. That means Devicescape's SoftGPS will likely be able to connect to its back-end servers quite a lot of the time, where Skyhook will be relying on a network connection made by the user, or a 2G or 3G cellular data connection.

Both companies can offer "deferred" lookup, too. That's what I get with my Eye-Fi cards, the SD camera cards with Wi-Fi built-in. The Eye-Fi (with the right model or add-on subscription) captures Wi-Fi scans along with photos. When you use its software to transfer photos, a Skyhook lookup happens and adds geotagging (EXIF metadata) to the images.

I tend to disagree with my colleague Om Malik, who writes at this GigaOm site that Devicescape "may find itself outgunned" in competition with Google and Skyhook, while contending with Apple and Nokia no longer needing to outsource for such Wi-Fi-based information. (Apple recently stopped using Skyhook in its iOS: neither the iPad nor iOS 4 uses that firm's data.)

Rather, the market for location is expanding, and not everyone wants to be in bed with Google, nor will Skyhook have the right mix or technology for each potential customer. And, Om omits the fact that Google has agreed to be or is prohibited from collecting Wi-Fi data from Street View in many countries, although Android-based location collection is likely unimpaired.

The addition of Devicescape to the Wi-Fi location market seems like a clear win for everyone but Skyhook, which now has to contend with a potentially strong and savvy competitor that knows plenty about device-level driver and OS integration. For manufacturers, service providers, and customers, there will likely be a faster pace of devices knowing where we are.

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