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**Resources**

## Weatherbug may rain on Weather.com's parade

[Dan Fost](#)

With help from schools across the country -- including 60 in the Bay Area -- and more than 100 TV stations, including KPIX (Channel 5) in San Francisco, a little-known upstart called Weatherbug is giving online giant Weather.com a run for its money.

Weatherbug employs a clever business model in which its parent company sells weather stations to schools. A school, or a sponsor for the school, buys the \$12,000 station for use as a learning tool in science classes. The company then collects the information, and sells it to television stations, which use it in their nightly weather reports.

And now the company is putting the data on the Web for anyone to see, and selling ads to support that endeavor.

Although the two leading Internet measurement firms disagree wildly about who is in the lead, they agree that it's significant that Weatherbug is winning in one measurement. In October, Weatherbug passed Weather.com in ComScore Media Metrix's measurement of Web traffic, although Nielsen/Netratings shows Weather.com holding to a firm lead.

That a new site could come along and challenge the supremacy of a site as strong as Weather.com proves a few things. For one, everyone apparently does love to talk about the weather -- even though experts scoffed when the Weather Channel launched 20 years ago.

And perhaps more interestingly, it reveals the continuing evolution of media businesses on the Internet. Even though the conventional wisdom had sites bulking up and achieving dominance in their markets early, that doesn't mean they're immune to competition later.

Weather.com has every conceivable advantage: It's owned by the Weather Channel, a privately held division of Landmark Communications of Norfolk, Va., it has the premium domain name, and its content is licensed on all the major Web sites -- America Online, Yahoo, the Microsoft Network -- as well as publications like USA Today.

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But Weatherbug came from a completely different angle. A Maryland company called AWS Convergence Technologies -- founded in 1993 by some high-tech entrepreneurs who had worked in the defense industry -- developed a way to transmit data from a weather station across the Internet.

From there, the company built a network. It sold weather stations to schools, about 6,000 so far. The stations are priced at \$11,900, and the annual curriculum license is \$995 per year. In the Bay Area, stations range from the San Francisco Day School, to Lexington Elementary School in Los Gatos,

to San Leandro High School, to the College of Marin.

AWS takes the information from those stations and sells it to more than 100 local television stations across the country.

"It's really helpful . . . being connected in an area with so many microclimates," said Samantha Mohr, weather anchor for the Channel 5 Eyewitness News. "We do use it to see the fog rolling in. . . . All forecasts are only as good as the data you start with."

Three years ago, the firm began offering its product as Weatherbug, an application available for free download from the Internet. (It also sells its data to energy companies.)

More than 17 million people have downloaded Weatherbug to date, said Andy Jedynak, general manager of Weatherbug. "We're adding a stadium full of people every day," he said.

Weatherbug also includes a feature that allows people to get the weather information for free by picking which advertiser they see the most. "We applied for a patent on the concept of choosing your own advertiser," Jedynak said.

For instance, someone tired of being bombarded with mortgage ads might instead decide to see ads from Arthritis.com. For those users who don't want any ads, a premium version is available for \$19.95 per year.

According to ComScore Media Metrix, Weatherbug first overtook Weather.com in October, when its traffic jumped from 10.4 million unique visitors to 23.2 million unique visitors. During that same period Weather.com's traffic rose slightly, from 15 million to 15.5 million.

Weatherbug held its lead in November, 27.7 million to 13.9 million.

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Weather.com doesn't see Weatherbug as a threat. For one thing, Nielsen/Netratings for November show Weather.com with nearly twice as many visitors as Weatherbug -- 15.2 million to 8.4 million.

Nielsen ranks Weather.com as the 18th most popular site on the Net. Among news and information sites, it trails only About, CNN and MSNBC. Weather "is certainly a significant factor online," Nielsen senior analyst Carolyn Clark said.

Is Weatherbug a competitor? "There's no impact to what we're doing," said Debora Wilson, president and chief executive officer of Weather.com, which is based in Atlanta.

She said Weather.com's traffic grew 40 percent during the past year, almost four times the rate of Internet growth in general. "We couldn't be growing like that if they were in any way impacting our user base," she said.

Wilson said she joined the Weather Channel nine years ago with a mission of leveraging the brand into new businesses. She started a 900 telephone service, a radio network and a network to supply weather information to newspapers. In 1995, with the Web in its infancy, the company started Weather.com. It didn't even have to pay a king's ransom for the domain name; it was still available for the taking.

Like many other Internet firms, Weather.com is largely supported by advertising, but is now starting other services it can sell. For instance, Notify, available for \$5.99 per month or \$49.99 per year, sends alerts of severe weather to home or cell phones.

"The first warning I got was of a tornado warning in my ZIP code," Wilson said. "I got a call at 2:30 in the morning. If you ever lived through a tornado, you want to be notified. And at 2:30 in morning, you're usually sleeping."

She decamped to the basement with her husband and daughter, but the tornado skipped her house.

Weather.com is privately held, as are its parent companies, and it won't release any financial information. The same goes for Weatherbug. But executives on both ends hint that weather is not an unprofitable business.

"If you think about it," Wilson said, "unlike almost anything else, weather is so universally relevant to everybody. It impacts your life in big ways and in little ways.

"And not just maybe once a month, like some sites or some content -- like you might check your bank


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"And," Wilson said, perhaps stating the obvious, "there's so much to say about the weather."

*Media Bytes appears every Thursday in The Chronicle. Send buzz, dirt, tips and comments to [dfost@sfchronicle.com](mailto:dfost@sfchronicle.com).*

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