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To determine accuracy of weather forecasts, 'just plug in the numbers'

By CHRIS SPITTAL
Daily Reporter Staff Writer

Some people take stock in the adage about curiosity killing the cat, but even those who do can't apply the same principle to computer technologists.

Entrepreneur Eric Floehr, who has a bachelor's degree in computer information science from Ohio State University, decided to turn his curiosity about the accuracy of weather forecasting into money.

"I took my skill working with computers and applied it to weather forecasting," he said. "It just kind of grew from there."

Floehr began forecastwatch.com in 2003, and the company has been growing ever since. Forecastwatch.com is owned and operated by Marysville, Ohio-based Intellovations LLC, which specializes in data collection and analysis systems and Internet-based software.

Floehr said the idea for forecastwatch.com began when he was studying the accuracy of forecasts in the 20 largest cities in the United States in order to improve the accuracy of forecasters.

"Initially the focus was on meteorologists. If we can make them happy, we can make anyone happy," he said, explaining the demanding nature of their jobs.

Forecastwatch.com can take forecasted and actual weather data and determine the quality of a forecast. That data can be combined with statistical tools and historical data to improve future forecasts.

Its products can compare a meteorologists' forecast with other forecast providers, break down a forecast for a more specific accuracy calculation, as well as help forecasters provide a more accurate, quality Web presentation, he said.

Floehr added that the company's Web site is much more dynamic now than when it started, offering products, news and account specific data.

Forecastwatch.com now calculates more than 800 locations in the United States, and works with clients such as AccuWeather and CustomWeather, two large commercial weather services; AccuWeather being the world's largest.

Floehr noted that forecastwatch.com already has expanded into Canada. It helped CTV, Canada's pre-eminent broadcast communications company evaluate the accuracy in 20 Canadian cities, he said.

Forecastwatch.com recently released its "Best Places to Live and Work if you Need to Know What the Weather will be Like Tomorrow" report, which evaluates the accuracy of forecasts in more than 600 U.S. cities.

More than 5 million one-to-five day weather forecasts from 2004 were evaluated on temperature variability, and accuracy of the actual forecast. Floehr said cities that ranked the highest had less temperature variability, noting that forecasts for Florida generally would be accurate because the state is mostly hot and sunny.

"But in Ohio, it's 90 degrees one day and 70 the next, so it's harder," he said. Ohio's major cities were consistently in the middle of the rankings, with Columbus coming in at 355.

Honolulu, Hawaii came in first, followed by Key West, Fla. North Dakota, which had the most variable temperatures, had five of the bottom 10 cities in the study.

"If it's less consistent temperature-wise, then weather forecasts for that area were less accurate," Floehr said.

Floehr said forecastwatch.com is trying to expand its scope, as well as its clientele. While it started by only evaluating temperatures, forecastwatch.com now is looking at probability of precip-

itation and accuracy of precipitation.

Floehr said the study will include a look at "unskilled forecasts," which also were taken into consideration for its "Best Places to Live" report.

"If you never predict rain, you're going to be right around 70 percent of the time," he said. "Forecasters should be better than that."

Floehr said forecastwatch.com is beginning to target an audience outside of forecasting. He said forecasts can help business owners and individuals make better weather-related decisions. He hopes to include services for industries such as construction, and utility and energy companies.

Floehr added that knowing the accuracy of a forecast a day could help futures traders, as well as those in the construction industry.

"If it (weather) is real bad, it can delay a project," said Jacquie Ayres, marketing director at Equity, a Columbus-based development firm. She added that while other factors are more prominent, weather does influence planning for projects.

Jim Hiltz, executive director of the Building Industry Association of Central Ohio agreed, saying that long-term forecasts can influence the scheduling for projects and crews.

Accurate weather forecasts can help energy and utility companies by allowing them to determine when more energy will be needed for heating or cooling, he said.

Aside from expanding to new clients, Floehr said forecastwatch.com is looking at expanding across borders. Though already in Canada, he said there is a possibility to expand into the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe.

"What forecastwatch.com does in the U.S. is replicable anywhere in the world. All you have to do is plug in the numbers," he said.