

BI Startup Targets Microsoft, Siebel CRM

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Semantra, a four-year-old company in Dallas, has developed what sounds like the Holy Grail of the database technologies: A business intelligence-like search tool that lets non-technical users make ad hoc queries in plain English. It's going after Microsoft (NSDQ: MSFT) and Siebel CRM customers first.

Database administrators would certainly be interested in a product that minimizes the effort involved in extracting business information from the rows and tables of a relational database. Standard database queries get programmed in advance; it's the spur-of-the-moment ad hoc queries that require extra time, expertise, and resources. Semantra's technology was developed by founder Marvin Elder, who created a natural language database access tool for PCs, called Salvo, twenty years ago. Investor CPMG has put \$6.1 million into the company.

Semantra's product is due for commercial release in the first quarter of 2008. But make no mistake--it's not plug-and-play. The company's natural language database access technology needs to be tuned twice: first for the business application it complements, and a second time for the company using it.

The vendor describes this fine tuning as "semantifying" its software. A CRM application, for instance, might have one set of language requirements; an ERP application, another. Similarly, the employees of an airline would use a different set of words than, say, a retail store. A customer may need to program more than 1,000 words and phrases into the software to get it right. Semantra offers professional services to help.

Semantra is doing some of the upfront work by integrating its software with target applications. The first will be Microsoft's software-as-a-service Dynamics CRM, followed later in 2008 by Siebel CRM. Semantra plans to become a partner of software companies such as Microsoft, Oracle, and SAP and the systems integrators, VARs, and ISVs that work with them.

Once the front-end work is done, Semantra's product is designed to let non-technical employees run ad hoc queries against company databases. With one to two hours of training, the success rate in getting such questions answered can exceed 90%, says VP of marketing Cody Aufricht. He admits, however, that Semantra's query tool is not a full fledged BI client along the lines of what Business Object and Cognos sell. "BI solutions are more robust--and more difficult," Aufricht says. Semantra claims nearly a dozen early adopters.

Semantra isn't eliminating the complexity of database queries; it's created a software layer that masks the complexity from the average user.