

## Interview With Jason Roks

Source: Unknown

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Why did you envision Hotline in the first place? From the very first time I tried Hotline I could feel the empowerment - the simplicity, the ease Connect to Hotline Servers of use/setup, the real time interaction, the feeling of being there and of course the SPEED!!! I was no longer simply working on a computer, I was now working with people. Hotline taps the power of Internet Networking with such simplicity that it is sometimes difficult to explain to people because they usually expect networking to be complicated.

Can you tell a little of the story of the founding of the company? You were spread out across the globe at first, weren't you?

Terry , Edmonton, Alberta, Canada Alex King - webmaster, Santa Clara CA, USA David Bordin, Toronto , Ontario Canada Adam Hinkley, Melbourne, Australia Phil Hilton, Maine, USA David Murphy, Maryland, USA Jason Roks, Toronto , Ontario, Canada

We all met on Hotline and after deciding to build a company we conducted our business over Hotline for one year before even meeting each other or hearing each others voices. With no voices or images of the other people, Hotline became an extension of ourselves. A fine-tuned engine where all the parts worked harmoniously.

Since you basically did the development of Hotline using Hotline, this gives you a lot of credibility when it comes to showcasing your product to potential corporate customers, doesn't it?

Yes. When people find out we were able to effectively work virtually for over a year they are impressed but if they have used Hotline before they are not surprised.

How would you characterize working collaboratively over the Internet for a long period of time? Are there any drawbacks? Any unexpected pluses?

I find that when you get to know people online you learn a their distinct personality. There is no prejudice against age, sex, race, etc. (just platforms ). All that is important is the value of what they think. Interestingly the personalities I perceived from those I have met online have usually been accurate measures when meeting them in person.

I personally prefer to work online and find that it eliminates many of the common distractions often associated with in-person contact, BUT I also feel it is essential that the parties have some in-person contact to help associate tone and personality to the text-based interaction. Sometimes much could be better expressed via telephone but generally working virtually frees the worker from the day to day grind.

What was the most difficult part of the early days of Hotline Communications?

The most difficult part was getting other people to see the same vision and understand the technology. Even today we

deal with this hurdle. Only recently has the industry recognized VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) and real-time collaboration as important emerging technologies. Sometimes I think we are just a bit too far ahead for people to fully comprehend the concept of simple networking.

Oh yeah...also dealing with the normal day to day BS of being a start-up. We found the investor base severely uneducated in technology. They reacted to buzzwords and in most cases they had never even used e-mail. Due diligence became a tutour session for the people they sent in to evaluate us. No disrespect to those individuals because the rate of technology development is much faster than the rate they can hire people who are up to date AND anyone with that level of understanding is usually starting their own high-tech company.

Did staying with an online delivery system have an adverse effect on your bottom line, versus shipping shrink-wrapped products through traditional distribution channels?

Not really, In fact with a good track record of online sales behind us, it has given us a more comfortable position when dealing with distributors and resellers... As a result we are currently completing deals with 2 major chains who approached us for retail distribution of shrink-wrapped product. There will always be those who prefer a physical product in their hands. As well there are those still remain leery of purchasing over the Internet even though it is light years safer than using a Credit Card at a restaurant or giving the number over the phone to the pizza guy.

On some of the Trackers out there, there's a LOT of pirated software, pornography, and dubiously legal music tracks. In fact, there's a thriving warez scene on Hotline. While I realize

that you never intended your software to be used for illegal purposes, do you ever feel like you've created something along the lines of the Sorcerer's Apprentice or a benign Frankenstein monster? Did you ever consider that unscrupulous users might utilize your software this way?

There will always be early adopters of technology and those are usually pirates, pornhausers and hackers. As the community grows they do not disappear but rather dilute. This has been demonstrated on the web where porn and warez websites have been diluted by the legitimate website growth. I consider porn and warez usage as a validation of the technology.

Hotline Communications, Ltd. will NOT police the Internet. It is not our place or responsibility. We are strict to enforce protection of our own software against piracy but that is where it ends. Of over 1 million Hotline users less than 5 have legal licenses. We know which well known computer companies use Hotline and have not paid for it. We also know that Hotline is on thousands of University computers and are not licensed... BUT there is little we can do to enforce this. It is overwhelming the massive growth we have experienced in such a short time and people pirating our software is part of the reason. Some software companies would silently prefer that people pirate their software than not use it at all. For this reason we decided to distribute fully functional evaluation versions to allow the user to experience our software and not have to resort to stealing it. Oddly this still has not stopped them ).

We have come to the conclusion that there is little we can do and thus have put our faith into people being honest and paying for what they use. Our responsibility is to educate the

user as best we can about copyright laws and respect for peoples work and time.

The Internet has turned the software industry on its ear. Distribution used to be the only limiting factor to piracy. The concept of shareware now applies to commercialware - if someone uses it on a regular basis they are obliged to pay for it. I believe all software should be try-before-you-buy or if not have a 100 money back refund for crappy software. Piracy forces developers to meet the quality demands of the consumer. The same will happen to music and in a way this is good. I do not expect we will see too many one hit wonders in the recording industry when the consumer can easily sample the entire CD before they spend their hard earned money to purchase it.

Will future versions of Hotline have any sort of block or centralized control to try and curtail pirating software or music?

Piracy is a problem with people, not Hotline. Socially, piracy must first be looked down upon before the issues can be addressed effectively. The world must be very careful where it steps because we are really defining the value and protection of Intellectual property. If the blatant disrespect for copyright continues unchecked and unscrutinized by society, we are in for some serious problems. It is also imperative that the legal system catches up quickly to the implications of electronic distribution of information. Copyright laws and enforcement must be international and extend beyond borders to have any effect. We are embarking on globalization similar to the wild west. The fate of intellectual property protection is in our own hands.

One day almost a year ago, I took it upon myself to phone the head legal counsel for Sony Music to ask what they were going to do about MP3s. When I finally reached him he had no comment other than that the Association for Music and Recording Arts would handle it for them. This choice by to pass the buck is part of the reason why the Music industry in for a rough and frantic ride to catch up.

Have you been approached by any major companies, the SPA, or law enforcement entities about things like this?

We approached SPA and indicated that we felt a plan to educate the pirate was more important and effective than legal threats. We undertook a moral message attempting to show the disrespect associated with piracy. Thus far our morality campaign has been effective and has made a statement to our community that piracy is unacceptable behavior. Since implementing the campaign we have been able to calculate a 60 reduction in the open piracy of our applications.

Do you consider this part of your responsibility, or do you consider this sort of behavior a natural outgrowth of any new technology?

The only responsibility we hold is that of educating our user. As I stated before, piracy is a people problem not Hotline. Sony is not responsible for people who pirate burned CDs. Netscape for the warez and porn distributed via webpages, Smith & Wesson is not responsible for all gun deaths AND GM is not responsible for the bank robberies that use their cars as get-a-way vehicles. People are responsible and accountable for their own actions, no excuse or justification is acceptable.

The issue of piracy goes much deeper than I could even get into in a interview like this and I would rather give it full attention in a focused discussion group at another time.

Originally Hotline was built to combine a group of common NetScrawl network activities Internet Collaborative Art Tool such as chat, messaging, file transfer and news into one easy to use application. After doing this we came to realize that what we created was much more than a consolidated application.

The Hotline Client allowed me to connect in real-time to friends and colleagues to collaborate on files, ideas, discussions or simply to keep up on group news.

The Hotline Server ran unobtrusively in the background while I worked, allowing me to transform my regular desktop computer into a full blown 24/7 network server. Alternately I could simply pop up a server when needed to allow associates to connect and collaborate with my information. The flexibility of usage was unique in that I could either run a small private server over my modem at the click of a button to serve files to friends and peers OR use a Hotline server on a dedicated machine and high-speed network to facilitate large groups in a corporate or educational atmosphere. A server no longer meant that machine locked in the MIS managers office that people could not touch.

The vision became that networking CAN be simple, easy and affordable.

Your slogan is "There is more than the Web." What do you mean by that?

"There is More than the Web" is a slogan that came about to point out that the "Internet" and the "Web" are VERY different elements. Every day I come across the common error of people interchanging these two very different things.

The Internet is the NETWORK - the backbone. The web browser is simply a service that runs over the Internet to view a specific file format (HTML). The best comparison I can think of is that the Internet is like your OS and the web is your word processor. In fact, the Web was never meant to be much more than a text viewing system but it now seems that the computing industry is trying to shove every desire of networking and entertainment through this poor overworked system. It's like only using one application on your computer to do everything. Can you imagine creating graphics through your word processor, playing a game through MS Word or using that same application to listen to digital music? It does not make sense...it is inefficient, slow, and short sighted.

The industry has yet to realize that the "web" is inefficient for everything they want it to do, BUT...the web is no longer the only game in town. There is always a better way and the Internet is a big place. Hotline starts from scratch to redefine and optimize TCP protocols developed specifically for today's networking needs. Compared to old Unix protocols - quick-fixed to work with modern networks (ie. IRC, FTP and HTTP), Hotline protocols are better optimized, faster and more reliable. Considering that the current protocols used today are at least 10 years old it is not surprising that someone undertook such a task. It is surprising that all the consortiums and standards committees have not insisted on getting the protocols up to date but at the same time understandable since they have been handcuffed by the backward compatibility needs of its members.



When did you realize that HTML and the Web were more limiting in certain areas than liberating?

The realization that the web was limiting happened after seeing that there was more that the Internet could facilitate. Hotline in no way claims or tries to replace the web. We believe that the web has a rightful place as a delivery mechanism for static information. However we do not believe that the web is the messiah that many want it to be.

How many employees does the company have at present?

Hotline started with the volunteer efforts of many people and the strong support of the Hotline user community. Some of those original contributors are no longer actively involved with company but we will always remain grateful to the many people who helped push start this company. Contributors deserving special mention are David Murphy, Phil Hilton and Alex King.

Hotline Communications, Ltd. is a small close-knit team where all members play crucial and specific roles independently and in teams to build the company. Without the honed efforts of all its members, Hotline would not be where it is today.

Core Group Austin Page - Chairman Adam Hinkley - President (Has left the company) Bachir Rabbat - Interim President Terry Gregory - Sr. Technology Engineer David Bordin - VP Finance and Administration Jason Roks, VP Business Development

Interns & Associates Beau Belgrave - jr. programmer Michael Damweber - jr. programmer Ryan Nielsen - jr. programmer

Hotline Communications also has a group of helpers and techs who on a volunteer basis assist and support new users. It has been the combined efforts of everyone associated with Hotline Communications that defines the company.

Hotline is being released for Windows soon. What sort of issues were encountered in porting to Windows from the Mac? Did you run into any serious problems or was it smooth sailing for the most part?

Hotline develops with a set of proprietary libraries - essentially a x-platform development framework (API) that allows us to be the only company in the world that develops Mac and Win applications from the same set of code. - I'm sure a lot of other companies have their own internal library systems for commonly used elements, just not as extensive as what we have developed.

People do not realize that the Windows version of Hotline is already complete. It is the Win Library that is still in beta. When the Win library is complete ALL of our current beta Win apps will instantly become complete including the Hotline IIE (Internet, Intranet, Extranet) Suite (client/server/tracker), NetScrawl and two new applications currently in Alpha development.

There are distinct differences between Windows and Macintosh. This is why we created the framework to eliminate the inconsistencies at the application programming level. To accomplish this we spent a heck of a lot of time examining and defining the key differences to create a common API although the framework goes much further than this. Due to the

confidentiality of this framework, this is as much as I can reveal.

You're not going to abandon the Mac and concentrate solely on the Windows platform for Hotline, are you?

Definitely not!!! We are not OS prejudice in anyway. Mac and Win Operating Systems each have short comings. Hotline Communications believes that it does not matter what system you use. If I use a Panasonic phone I can still call someone who has a Sony phone.

Some Mac users on Hotline are ping-flooding PCs that login to their servers, or using other means to crash Windows machines on Hotline. What sort of response to you have to that? Or is it just teenagers playing rough with their new toys?

Ping Flooding and WinNuking is illegal. It is against the law to attempt to disrupt communication streams and it is also criminal mischief. I would not say it is kids doing this but rather immature individuals. In most cases it is done out of curiosity and fun rather than maliciously with intent to damage.

This is not really an issue for Hotline to be concerned about since these are security holes at the OS level. The Mac OS has proven quite secure but Micro\$oft has bigger problems. Windows 95/98/NT all have gaping security holes that allow someone to take down the networking by sending bogus data packets. The service packs available from Microsoft solve some of these problems but it seems every time MS patches a problem the hacker finds a new hole to exploit.

Example: Send or pretend to send a HUGE file to a Win NT server. The server will respond by shutting down the

networking to avoid receiving data too large for it to handle. This is sloppy on the part of Microsoft because a good operating system should not do this. I believe that one of the M\$ service packs solved this issue.

It kind of shows how fearful they are about what they view as their turf, don't you think?

I am sick and tired of platform wars and the whole situation disturbs me. This happens on both sides just that MS machines are affected more easily. I think this issue stems more into human nature - the conflict to be different and yet conform and belong... We have a need to separate people into groups and suppress others for not believing the same things we do. IT IS INSECURITY!!!!!! Lewzers - people who do not have self confidence. Coincidentally, these people are usually the same ones who exhibit these insecurities in other areas of life. Some people will be prejudice by religion, sex, age, race and now by OS choice. It is SILLY and primitive!!!!

As the Internet grows, and more people and companies go online, what sort of package would you like to see Hotline evolve into? What are some of the features you see becoming feasible in the next couple of years?

Although the Internet is growing very rapidly I do not believe that the technology of the Internet has kept up. IMO websites are a step backwards in networking and the solutions developed for the web are hacks. When the majority of companies are trying to cash in on the popularity of the web, technology has suffered. The people who would normally be developing NEW technology have settled on developing backward compatible web-integrated technologies. The result

is the loss of good developers who are simply going to where the money is.

Hotline is geared to network communications solutions - developing applications for modern networks. We pride ourselves on innovation not regurgitation ) What the future holds will be defined as the new territories are charted. The two main factors limiting the implementation of new features are bandwidth constraints and the average persons overall comprehension of computing technology. Technology will always progress simply as a result of knowing more.

As technologies become standardized and reliable we will integrate the ones that our customers demand, ie. video, audio, scratch n' sniff, etc.

Any plans for the long-awaited, living room "telecomputer," or set-top box? I would think that Hotline would be ideal for such a convergence platform.

I believe the NetBox as it has been presented will not succeed. Application sharing does not make sense over networks mostly since Processors and RAM are cheaper and much faster than bandwidth.... Meaning: why would I let my processing power go wasted and strain my bandwidth to share an app over a network when all that is really necessary to communicate is the data.

A NetBox with client side applications makes a whole lot more sense where the processor does the work client side and the network simply passes the key file data.

ie. I will send my Photoshop tiff files over the Internet to another user who will open it in their copy of Photoshop. They

would not run Photoshop over the network and then open the file. File formats have always been cross platform and are usually smaller than the application that created them - so why share the application when it is faster to share the file.

I've heard rumors (on Hotline, naturally) about a Virtual Classroom project. Is it real? If so, what is it, and what are some of the main features planned for it?

The rumour is only partially true. We have not officially undertaken a virtual classroom project but since April '97, Apple Education has been bundling Hotline Client/Server in the Internet Curriculum Connections Bundle. At the student level Hotline has found its way onto practically every University Campus in the world - in dorms, on student machines and in campus kits. As more educators use this system for teaching I am sure we will receive feature requests based on their needs. We react based on what our customers demand.

Using Hotline for Virtual Teaching has proven to be an ideal fit since it solves the ease of use and multi operating system requirements of education. I see Virtual Classrooms as a way to distribute quality teaching to remote areas that have been cheated by lack of funding or poor location. Inner cities and Outskirt areas can now have top teachers collaborate where normally they would not set foot for various personal reasons. The Virtual Classroom WILL be a big part of and influence on the future of education.

(continued)

As opposed to the Web, on Hotline there's no "adspace," or ready-made banners area for advertisements. The Web has been compared to "TV on Steroids," and one of the cool things

about Hotline has always been that it's more attuned to the original spirit of the Net, where there were very few advertisements or other corporate presence. Have you felt any pressure from outside the company to include such functionality in future versions? It seems to me that companies would be more interested in how Hotline would help them do their jobs, rather than promote their products. What do you think?

When the web was first implemented it was intended for information, since hitting the mainstream the web has become about promotion. Hotline has full intention of keeping true to the spirit of the Internet as a place to share information - not a place to count hits and people like cattle.

The advantage to advertising remains that it allows a server owner to subsidize their services. Advertising is not the only way a server owner can earn revenue for their work supporting and developing their particular service, i.e. subscriptions and members areas are a way to get value for content. The more valuable the content, the more ways available to profit from providing it.

Hotline is just starting to see servers coming about that offer top content at a price - usually as member subscriptions. This is a natural transition as Hotline becomes more widely used and accepted as a new standard. Hotline server administrators are also using advertising to support their services by requiring the user to first visit a website to be counted before they can get the password to the server's content.

The customer must realize that information has a price. When using the web or watching television you accept that

advertising is paying for your content. Information should always be perceived as valuable.

The world as we know it is changing rapidly due to technology. We are happy to be in the middle of it all. We all love our work and that is the key to enjoying ones life. I see many companies and individuals like ourselves who are getting the chance to do what they love. Passion for ones work will undoubtedly garner respect and success. If something is undertaken for profit rather than passion it will not last very long. Financial gain is simply a byproduct.

On a final note I would like to extend our thanks to our very loyal and sometimes fanatical Hotline User Community.

Our thanks to Jason for such an exhaustive, but hopefully not exhausting, interview! Good luck to him and the rest of Hotline Communications in the future. See you all on Hotline!

Hotline is unique among internet software. Not just chat, not just [Image] file transfer, not just bulletin Hotline Communications' Magazines board news posting Products but an integrated MacWEEK suite of all three [Client Software] Macworld functions, packed ZD Publications into a small ZD Archive memory footprint, ZD Subscriptions and with elegant Hotline Client Software internet tracking Connect to Hotline Servers of active servers. Hotline [Client Software] [Click for great software buys at Software BuyLine.] Communication's [Win a blazing new 300 MHz PC - click here to enter!] motto "There is more than the Web" is certainly true. Hotline Server Software Hotline differs Setup your own Hotline Server from the Web in startling ways, [Client Software] there's an actual sense of activity on a Hotline Server. You see Hotline Tracker Software and hear people Setup a tracker of online come and



go, Hotline Servers people chat publicly and [Client Software] privately--there's a real sense of community that a static page cannot NetScrawl come close to. Internet Collaborative Art Tool There are also no ads. Don't get me wrong, ads have their place in society, and the Web's targeted banner is getting a little better at matching the right ads to the right people, eerie as that is sometimes. But it is refreshing to go somewhere online and get a taste of what the Web was like before banners started eating up huge chunks of bandwidth. Hotline is reminiscent of the early days of BBS servers in that way. With no dedicated adspace, its communal feel, and its inherent ease of use, Hotline has attracted a large base of enthusiastic users. As usual with any new communication technology, this is a two-edged sword.

There's a sizable percentage of people on Hotline doing just what they used to do on the dialup bulletin board system in the old days: trading pirated software, trading pornography, and even trading pirated music tracks. There are the usual hotbeds of rumor mongers, conspiracy theorists, and fringe wackos that are everywhere on the Web, but on Hotline you get to see them all, mixed up in no particular order. Some of the larger public trackers are almost completely swamped by servers that come and go, serving up "warez," sometimes for free, sometimes for trade. The "signal-to-noise ratio" problem has gotten so difficult for legitimate servers that there are now password protected trackers that only list servers that are above board.

But Hotline is more than the pirate hotbed some might make it seem. Many small businesses, looking for simple, effective, and cheap groupware, use it to manage workflow and give remote users a home base when on the road. Even Avid Software, digital video powerhouse, has used Hotline to coordinate

remote locations. It's a perfect example of how technology is a mirror of ourselves; the way we use it reflects who we are. In this interview with Jason Roks, VP of Business Development at Hotline Communications and one of the founders of the company, we learn more about this innovative company, their plans for the future, and their perspective on some of the thornier issues surrounding their software. Check it out!