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Got Roomfuls of Stuff? Now Sites Will Help Keep Track of It

By [BOB TEDESCHI](#)

PACK rats, shopaholic showoffs and avid collectors take note: the Internet will give you a place to track your stuff for free. One condition: you have to keep your wallet open.

At least three companies have emerged in recent months with the aim of helping people catalog and value their possessions and post them online.

The obvious question is, how many people would be bothered to catalog all their stuff, online or off? The answer, surprisingly enough, is millions. Whether there are enough of them to make a long-term business out of it, though, is anyone's guess.

Executives say the plan is to attract millions of people, then find retailers who want to sell them more items to go along with their possessions, which users would presumably add to the site — and so on. (Wisely, perhaps, these services charge users nothing to type in endless lists of items, and they have designed the sites to protect the privacy of their users.)

None of these businesses make money yet, but Zebo, with more than six million users, has a big head start against competitors.

“The others have a challenge ahead of them,” said Randy Giusto, an analyst with IDC, a technology consultancy. “Zebo has been able to tap into the community feel that MySpace and others have evolved.” An offshoot of an online advertising technology company in San Francisco called Zedo, Zebo has so far appealed mainly to a younger crowd that uses its personal belongings as a social lubricant of sorts. Users post personal pages, à la MySpace, featuring lists of important items they own or want to own, and links to friends' Zebo pages. Unlike MyThings and iTaggit, which use technology or site experts to help users determine the value of their items, Zebo's users estimate their own net worth.

Take Kim E, a 29-year-old who recently posted a page on the site. She lists 11 items on her page worth a total that she estimated at \$22,133.44, including her \$21,000 Nissan, and one item on her wish list: a \$900 Canon XTi digital camera. She also listed four friends, including one, Maria, who posted a

comment on her page. (“Heyy kim ... u hav a lot of stuff.”)

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Roy de Souza, the chief executive of both Zebo and Zedo, said the site, which ended its testing phase in September, is focused on helping users shop together rather than helping individuals manage items they own, as its competitors do.

“The concept is that people will list things they own, discuss them with friends and help others decide what to buy,” he said.

So far, Mr. de Souza said, the site has not earned a profit, mainly because it has not yet built systems to capitalize on its users’ consumerism. Zebo will in the coming months include more ways for retailers to, say, pitch cameras to Kim E and others who advertise their wish lists on the site.

“Right now, the site has some [Google](#) ads I need to get rid of,” Mr. de Souza said. “Eventually, it’ll all be about selling products.”

In the quest to persuade people to post items they own, MyThings has a different solution, according to Martha Danly, the company’s chief marketing officer. In addition to allowing people to record items manually, the company is lobbying online retailers to automatically log purchases on MyThings, with the permission of members.

Ms. Danly said retailers and manufacturers who register purchases with MyThings on behalf of its customers will earn the right to advertise related items to those customers whenever they visit their MyThings pages. The site retrieves warranty information and product specifications when someone logs in an item, saving that information on their MyThings page.

The company, which is based in Menlo Park, Calif., only recently began approaching American retailers and manufacturers, but MyThings has for the last several months used a similar approach with its British Web site. Among others, [Tesco](#) Direct, the online unit of the big British retailer, participated in the program. Ms. Danly said the rate at which Tesco’s customers registered their purchases with MyThings “was amazing. That’s going to be our primary way of acquiring new customers here.”

Ms. Danly said this approach can spare users the need to record serial numbers and purchase records. “It’s essentially a digital shoe box of the things you’re buying, which is important if you have a warranty claim or it’s stolen,” she said.

Like its competitors, MyThings allows people to post lists of possessions privately, with only user names associated with their collections. The company passes on user names only to retailers who log purchases into the site.

MyThings is an outgrowth of an online service called Trace.com, introduced in late 2004 as a way to help people track down lost or stolen valuables, like fine art and antiques, or looted Nazi-era art. That site, which still operates, is working with law enforcement officials to build a central database of stolen goods so that auction houses, pawn shops and other businesses may determine the legitimate ownership of items they sell, and report stolen property.

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Items registered with MyThings, Ms. Danly said, are automatically registered with Trace.com, so if users lose those goods, pawnbrokers or others can alert the owners and law enforcement agents.

Accel Partners, which backed Facebook among others, and Carmel Ventures, a venture capital firm specializing in software companies, pumped \$8 million into MyThings a year ago. Earning back that money will take time; Ms. Danly said the company will begin running ads this summer, at the earliest.

iTaggit, which is based in Austin, Tex., already lists ads on its Web site, which began publicly in February. David Altounian, the company's chief executive, declined to comment on sales, but said: "We're happy with where we've gotten."

"This is tough though," Mr. Altounian added. "There are people who post books and movies and want to share it with others and post it on MySpace. And then there are those who own higher-end stuff who are looking to track the dollar values and preserve their investments."

In a sense, Mr. Altounian's constituencies bridge those of Zebo and MyThings. Satisfying both groups "is a really big challenge," he said, and involves embracing the evangelism of those who will post their iTaggit CD collections on their MySpace pages, while also serving more serious collectors with sophisticated cataloging and tools.

The good news in serving both is that they ultimately merge. "We find that people that are serious enough about collecting music," Mr. Altounian said, "tend to become collectors in other areas."

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