Messages from Modern Inventors to the Next Generation

Season 2
9. *Map Information Retrieval Services: MAPION*
 - Mr. Koya Sato, President and CEO, Mapion Co., Ltd.

I'm sure that some of you at one time or another have used maps on your mobile phones or personal computers to find the location of a store, for example, or check whether that store has any online coupons.

Well, these types of services were created out of the idea that it would be convenient for users if they could get information about shops displayed on maps showing areas throughout Japan. Then from there, the idea of creating "on-line cities" followed.
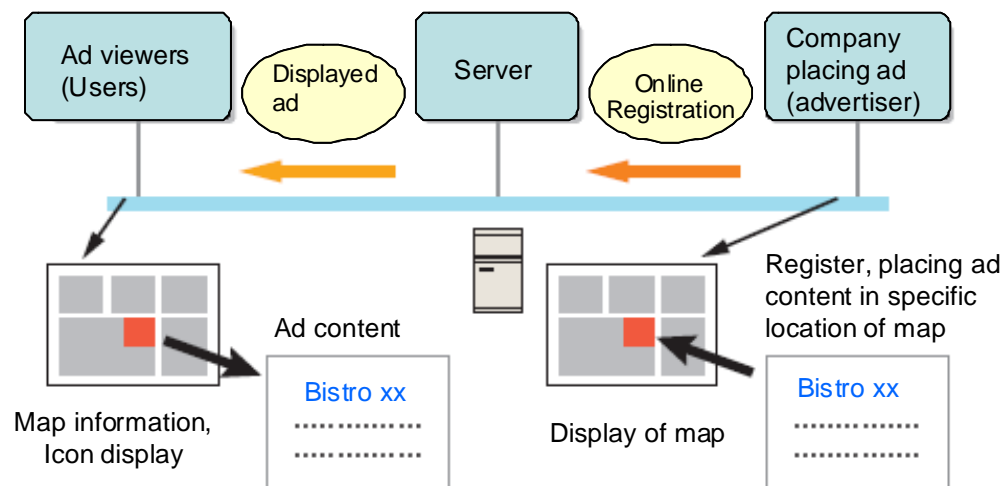
In trying to make this idea a reality, I have encountered many unexpected difficulties. What drove me to keep on working was my strong belief that this type of service would most certainly be a success.

What about Mapion and the technology involved?

"Mapion" became the first website in Japan that enabled users to search maps of the country for free by using the Internet. By letting users look at maps on the Internet, Mapion Co., Ltd has been able to gather a multitude of users and develop its business of displaying search-engine results on maps and displaying company and store advertisements on maps. The scheme works like this. Businesses place their icons on a Mapion map, whereby that icon becomes an advertisement. And when viewers click on those icons, the respective businesses websites appear, with Mapion providing those websites. Stores and businesses can freely register and modify their websites. This

whole system itself has been awarded a business method patent*. And since this business method patent was first used by Mapion, it has become famous as the "Mapion Patent".

*Business method patents are a class of patents given to inventions for business methods making use of computers and networks

Ad viewers (Users) — Displayed ad — Server — Online Registration — Company placing ad (advertiser)

Map information, Icon display — Ad content — Display of map — Register, placing ad content in specific location of map

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What inspired you to invent/develop Mapion?

In 1993, at the time the Internet started to gain popularity, one boss suggested that we might be able to develop some type of business based on this new form of expression. Based on these words, we launched a project. Out of the many ideas proposed, I had one. It was to create an advertising service by using maps. This idea was born out of my experience with pocket-tissue packs that are passed out for free in front of train stations, and which have advertisements and maps of food and beverage establishments printed on the back. I would take the tissues, but one day I looked up from the street and saw restaurant and bar signs on buildings. And then, an inspiration hit me. I thought, "What if we were to put information about these restaurants and bars on Internet maps, telling people about today's specials or providing other news valuable to customers?" We could enable the owners to simply and easily update that information, and maybe they would even pay money to register their businesses. On top of that, I thought, "What if users could search for restaurants by looking at maps? That would be convenient for them too." And so that became the basis for Mapion.

What specific ideas and difficulties have you faced in inventing or developing Mapion?

"Maps" are the key to this entire business. We initially failed in negotiations for map rights. The map makers couldn't believe that we wanted to upload maps on the Internet and lets users view

them for "free". The map makers said that if we let people look at maps for free, people would stop buying printed maps. Nevertheless, we were determined to make this business succeed. And it was then that we had an idea: "It's better to create something out of nothing." So we went about creating maps and related data on our own. I first tried making maps based on aerial photographs, but I learned that it was too difficult to create the type of accurate and detailed maps that I had in mind. Then, I decided to visit the Geographical Survey Institute, a government-run organization that is the authority on surveying and mapping Japan, to see if they would provide us with their map data. We visited the Institute again and again and finally were able to obtain the approval to use their data. Then, using only the road maps updated by the Geographical Survey Institute, we spent a year developing our own map database, which would form the basis for displaying building images on maps and doing map searches. Working under these circumstances, I learned through my own experience that when you are on the road to success, it is important for you to continue the challenge without giving up. My strong and persistent determination to obtain the quality of maps I wanted is what has enabled Mapion to differentiate itself from the competition.

Maps: 3D Map created by Mapion (http://www.mapion.co.jp)

What message would you like to convey to the next generation?

Nowadays, it is easy for us to access a variety of information by using mobile phones and personal computers. New services are popping up on the Internet every day. In this connection, it would be kind of fun for you yourself to imagine what you want or what you want to use. Each and every one of you has your own particular character. You don't have to be afraid of being different from others. After all, everyone around you has their own personality. In order for you to turn your ideas into reality, it is important for you keep good company. Surround yourself with people who respect each other, who voice their opinions, and who can even clash over their personality differences. And then combine the strengths of all your close companions, and give wings to the ensuing excitement.