

Online networking for entrepreneurs

By David Ortiz

A local technology company is harnessing the power of the Internet to connect entrepreneurs around the world.

RoundOne, an online content and social networking Web site for entrepreneurs, offers a forum where entrepreneurs at any stage of a venture can discuss ideas, read others' blogs and even develop business plans online.

The site, which calls itself "the entrepreneur's playbook" and is free to join, was founded two years ago by media and marketing specialist Sue Tremblay and Danny Warshay, an adjunct professor of entrepreneurship at Brown University and a former publisher of Rhode Island Monthly magazine.

Warshay and Tremblay are seeking to cash in on the explosion of interest in social networking Web sites such as Facebook, created in 2004 by a Harvard University student, which has quickly become an international phenomenon among college and high school students.

In September, Yahoo offered a reported \$900 million for Facebook. Mark Zuckerberg, 22, the company's founder and chief executive, declined the offer. In addition to its social networking module, RoundOne also offers articles and blogs from more than 50 experts in entrepreneurship around the world. Local bloggers featured on the site include Bill Stone, a principal of the Boston-based legal services firm OutsideGC, and Cliff Dutton, a former executive at Ibis Consulting in Providence.

As with other social networking sites, members are encouraged to contribute their own blogs and to rate the content provided by the "experts," Warshay said.

But RoundOne also offers a suite of proprietary collaboration tools that enable members to hold meetings in which they instant-message one another – or even speak to one another, using Skype software (a free voice over Internet communication program).

"RoundOne has a laser focus on the niche of empowering aspiring entrepreneurs around the world," Warshay said. "Before the Internet, I don't know how someone in a small little village in India could have found a complementary player on their team in Tel Aviv or Palo Alto."

On Oct. 9, RoundOne and the Brown Forum for Enterprise announced an agreement under which the enterprise forum became a client of RoundOne. The forum is a statewide entrepreneurship organization, affiliated with Brown, that sponsors networking events throughout the year for local entrepreneurs, investors, venture capitalists and service providers. It also holds an annual conference on entrepreneurship that attracts hundreds of attendees.

Under the agreement with RoundOne, forum members can access a specially branded corner of the RoundOne Web site, where they can network with other forum members and find announcements and other content specific to their organization.

Through RoundOne's collaboration tools, forum members will be able to track their task lists, share documents and communicate privately on the site, said forum director Victoria M. Barbata. At the same time, she said, RoundOne will give the forum's members access to a global community of entrepreneurs.

"Now they can seek out who they want to connect with, anytime and anywhere," Barbata said. "We hope it stimulates conversations for them in New England and throughout the world to help get their ventures off the ground."

Barbata said she hopes the partnership with RoundOne will help the forum to grow its membership, which currently stands at about 35.

RoundOne recently forged a similar partnership with an international nongovernmental organization, and is seeking other such clients, Warshay said. The company currently has three employees who work in development, and about four Brown students who also contribute. But Warshay said he and Tremblay are not seeking venture capital to grow the company at this time.

Asked about any business ventures that have been founded or aided as a result of personal connections made through RoundOne, Warshay said all collaborations on the Web site are private, so he could not discuss them.

He also declined to say how many members RoundOne currently has, but said the site already has members in India, China, Australia, Israel, Canada and Latin America.

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