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Serial entrepreneur Disch ramps it up

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Entrepreneur Thom Disch is helping other business people get top billing on Web search engines, but he believes old-fashioned networking is still the best way to attract a loyal audience.

Disch's latest ventures, Internet Engine and the turnaround of ramp maker Handi-Ramp, thrive on word-of-mouth marketing that tight-knit communities generate.

Indeed, one of the criteria that Google, Yahoo, MSN and other search-engine owners consider in determining search results is how many people and Web sites link to a Web site, who promotes it, and whether the site is considered a leading authority in its industry. Other criteria include the site's content and how easy it is to navigate.

Internet Engine (Internet-Engine.net) charges from \$500 to more than \$50,000, depending on the breadth of work required, to ensure that a Web site gets noticed by search engines and to add e-commerce bells and whistles.

The startup, expected to generate \$500,000 in revenues this year, is an offshoot of an old-fashioned Libertyville manufacturer, and an example of Disch's belief in seizing upon serendipitous opportunities.

Disch, 51, bought Handi-Ramp, a 49-year-old manufacturer of ramps for people in wheelchairs, after he toured the plant with new owners who planned to liquidate the company.

"I convinced them to throw in the business if I paid the asking cost of the building," he said.

Disch grasped the opportunity in providing affordable ramps to the disabled and elderly

-- especially as the massive baby boom population ages. Able-bodied helpers set up the mobile ramps, which cost \$1,000, compared with retrofitting a van for \$30,000 to \$40,000.

Disch quickly set his sights on turning

than run through a voice-mail maze.

The company, with 30 employees and a projected \$7 million in sales this year, has enjoyed a 30 percent growth rate for each of the last 11 years.

Handi-Ramp's Web site generated so much traffic, Disch was inundated with requests from vendors, friends and customers to help them drive traffic to their Web sites. That's how Internet Engine was born.

Disch has now started selling used furniture from businesses online - yet another venture that started with a request to remove cabling from an office.

Disch, who founded an independent gasoline company at age 19, advises would-be entrepreneurs to get ready to work incredibly hard, keep in touch with bankers to spot funding opportunities, and maintain great relationships with vendors.

Steven Rogers, director of the Larry and Carol Levy Entrepreneur Institute at the Kellogg School of Management, said Disch exemplifies the model of would-be entrepreneurs learning the fundamentals of business before striking out on their own.



around the failing business. He set up a Web site (HandiRamp.com), and immediately learned that many wheelchair-bound people use the Internet as a primary way to shop, learn and network.

The ensuing Web traffic prompted Disch to set up "click to talk" and instant-messaging features on the site so customers could talk in real time with the company. He also set up a system that enables customers to talk by phone directly to a salesperson, rather

Disch sold his first business, and learned business strategies at KPMG Peat Marwick (now BearingPoint), Playboy magazine and PHH Fantus, later bought by Deloitte & Touche.

"The deck is stacked against entrepreneurs," Rogers said. "An entrepreneur cannot afford to make lots of mistakes."

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