

MARKETPLACE

Entrepreneur uses Web site as tool to connect families

BY CHET DEMBECK

Kevin Strauss wanted to find an innovative way to open up the lines of communication between parents and their teen-age children.

So he created a Web site.

The site, www.familyejournal.com, allows families who pay a membership fee to speak through messages they post on the site that only they and their relatives have access to.

More than 200 families worldwide have signed onto the site and are daily sharing their thoughts and feelings with each other electronically, said Strauss, president of Columbia-based Now or Never LLC, the company he founded to run the site.

Communication is stimulated by family members answering four daily questions posted on the site, such as, "How did you feel when you woke up today?" or "What do you see as your role in your family?"

"The whole rationale for the site is that someone is more likely to express their true feelings by writing them down," said Strauss, 34, a Columbia resident.

Moreover, they're not likely to be interrupted or drawn into irrelevant discussions, which can happen when family members talk to each other face-to-face, Strauss added.

But the most important feature of the journal is that it makes it possible for a child to express himself or herself freely to a parent without feeling intimidated.

"When using the journal everyone is equal," Strauss said.

Sparking dialogue

Wendy Kliewer, a clinical psychologist and associate professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, believes family ejournal has the potential to spark dialogue between parents and teens who find themselves growing apart.

"I do know that when a family can

connect with each other, there can be a breakthrough," Kliewer said.

Still, she cautioned that family ejournal is no substitute for professional counseling, which is necessary when serious conflicts exist between family members.

Families from the United States, Canada, Spain, Ireland and many other countries have had positive experiences using the ejournal, according to their testimonials.

"When we use the site, the difference is amazing — more respect is shown and we understand each other at a deeper level," wrote Leslie Ruggerio in an Oct. 2 e-mail from Spain.

Initially, family ejournal was free to use, but Strauss began charging a \$25 semi-annual fee per family in September.

He also has developed discount membership packages that can be bought and sold by nonprofit organizations to help raise money.

For example, ejournal is approved as a vendor for fund-raising activities with the Howard County Department of Education.

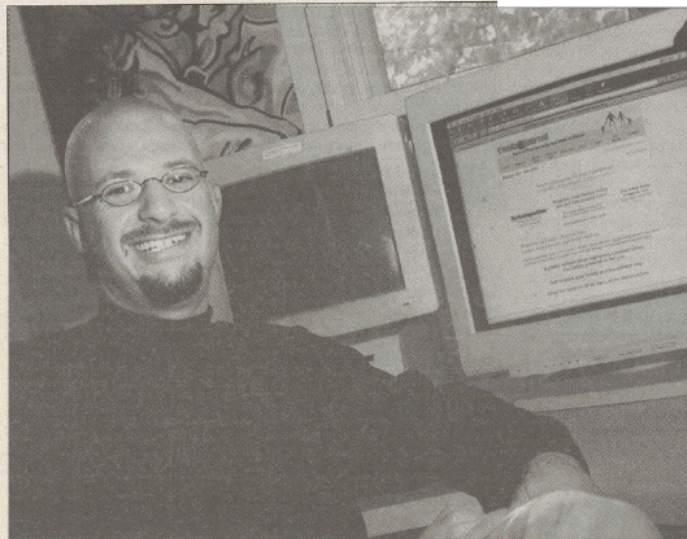
Strauss also offers a discount membership plan for companies that want to add family ejournal to their employee benefit programs.

If subscriptions soar, Strauss said, he will be able to add more content and services to the site. He'll also be able to keep the site free of advertising.

The idea for the journal popped into Strauss' head one night last December, as he watched an episode of the television show, "Boston Public." He launched the Web site in January.

"The story focused on the poor communication between the principal of the school and his daughter," Strauss recalled.

As someone interested in human behavior, Strauss said he was frustrated by an increasing lack of communication between teen-agers and their families.



Kevin Strauss of Columbia sits beside a computer that displays his Web site familyejournal.com at a friends home in Columbia. The site is designed to help family members, especially teens and their parents, better communicate with one another.

STAFF PHOTO BY NICOLE MARTIN

Noticing that many teen-agers were communicating by e-mail and in online chat rooms, Strauss believed they would be attracted to an online family journal.

Strauss took his idea to his day job, where he works as a grant researcher for McLean, Va.-based Amron Corp., a technology and research development company.

"Part of my job is to come up with ideas for the National Institutes of Health," Strauss said.

After the NIH declined his family ejournal proposal, Strauss decided to run with the idea himself and founded Now or Never after Amron made him the sole licensee of service. In return, Amron receives a percentage of family ejournal's revenue, but Strauss declined to elaborate on the specifics of the deal.

Meanwhile, Strauss also stresses that family ejournal is no substitute for professional counseling.

"It could be a supplement to counseling, making people more emotionally healthy," Strauss added.

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