

St. Paul Pioneer Press (MN)

January 27, 2008

Section: BUSINESS

Edition: St. Paul

Page: D8

SERVICE FOR SMALL WEB SITES

DOUG AND BRENDA ARNDT KNOW PLENTY OF PEOPLE CAN BUILD A WEB **SITE** -- AND WALK AWAY. THEIR FIRM GIVES SMALL BUSINESSES AN UPDATING ONLINE PRESENCE WITHOUT THE EXPENSE OF A FULL-TIME IT STAFF.

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Pioneer Press

It takes only a second to gauge whether a small-business Web **site** might be failing, Doug Arndt says. Scroll to the bottom of the home page. If it says something like "Copyright 2004," there's likely trouble.

Of course, it also takes just seconds to locate any of a multitude of Web designers who can update that. And so Arndt, founder of St. Paul startup **Reliable Sites** LLC, knew he needed to offer customers much more.

In Arndt's mind, too many Web designers launch rudimentary **sites** and wave goodbye. What small companies really need, the 43-year-old IT professional says, is someone to outsource the entire Internet operation to -- building a good Web **site**, hosting it and managing it on a month-to-month subscription basis.

Arndt knows something about his niche. He and his wife, Brenda, regularly teach free seminars on the fundamentals of effective Web **sites** to would-be entrepreneurs and small-business owners, for the St. Paul chapter of SCORE, the Service Corps of Retired Executives. Their class last fall was for soldiers returning from Iraq.

"We're pretty passionate about teaching people how to do this right," Arndt said.

Arndt, 43, has spent nearly two decades in IT, leaving college to work for Andersen Consulting, now Accenture. With Andersen, he wrote code for Northwest Airlines' ticket accounting and then did the same type of work at Delta Air Lines. At the height of the tech boom, he joined a startup called WebHelp Corp., where he was director of IT until it was bought by a Canadian company in 2002. Faced with moving to Montreal, Arndt decided to strike out on his own.

With two \$10,000 loans from two friends, an office in his Mahtomedi house and a rented data center, **Reliable Sites** LLC was born. (The Arndts have since built a new house and live in the little-known town of Willernie, 16 square blocks inside Mahtomedi.) He marketed with a simple brochure, walking down retail strips and knocking on doors, he said, starting in White Bear Lake, where he scored his first customer. Lakeside Floral Inc. needed a Web **site**. Four years later, it remains a loyal customer.

"I'm a fabulous florist, but I don't have an idea about Web **sites**," said Lakeside Floral co-owner Joanie Markland, who estimates that about 30 percent of her business is online. "Brides are always online for weddings."

Next, Arndt knocked on doors in Plymouth and Eagan, picking up more clients. In those early years, the Arndts kept their day jobs to make ends meet -- Brenda in corporate marketing and Doug in freelance IT work. It wasn't until last year, when **Reliable Sites** was about three years old, that it reached critical mass and they no longer needed other jobs to pay the bills, Arndt said.

Finally profitable, **Reliable Sites** moved into its new headquarters last year in downtown St. Paul. **Reliable Sites'** mission is simple: Build a money-making Web **site** that's as search engine-friendly as possible -- meaning a client's Web **site** will actually pop up high in potential customers search results. Arndt doesn't jump for expensive paid search ads, the company ads that, for instance, run down the right-hand side of a page of Google search results.

"We almost never recommend paid placement like banner ads or search advertising until you've done your search engine optimization of your **site** correctly," he said. "You are far better off spending your money getting your **site** to be search engine-friendly."

There are three basic components to driving Internet traffic to a **site**, Arndt said, whether it's an informational brochure online or an e-commerce **site**:

- --Get the hidden **site** structure (like metatags) right so search engines pick up your **site**. Remember that search engines won't recognize text inside images.
- Fine-tune your **site's** text so it answers a searcher's questions about the subject.
- Include relevant Internet links to and from the **site**.

Arndt recalled one client, Lindstrom-based Pet Steps to Heaven Inc., whose Web **site** had been built with so much Flash content for video and photos that it was bogged down and not driving traffic. **Reliable Sites** streamlined the **site** last year, making it much more text-based and search engine-friendly. The company, which makes unique stepping stone memorials out of the ashes of cremated pets, now has a clean, functional new look online. Co-founder John Laub estimates hits on the Web **site** have quadrupled since the improvements and that the company has expanded to preserving human ashes in memorial benches.

Arndt also devised a creative payment plan to make it easy for businesses to keep improving their Web **site**. Unlike most Web designers or search optimizers, which charge by the hour, **Reliable Sites** uses monthly contracts that run from \$59 to \$700, depending on the job. Clients are essentially purchasing so many minutes of work kept in what Arndt calls a bucket. When customers want a change to their **site**, they use the minutes in their bucket, which Arndt allows to go negative. A \$99 monthly contract buys about 16 hours a year, enough to create simple Web **site**.

The subscription model makes it easier for small companies to budget, Arndt said. It also provides incentives to update their Web **sites** -- a necessity, since search engines like Yahoo track how often a Web **site** changes.

COMPANY SPECS

Name: **Reliable Sites** LLC

Location: St. Paul

Type of business: Designer and manager of Web **sites**

Founded: 2003

Web: reliablesites.com

Employees: four

2007 revenue: \$187,000

Competition: Web design agencies such as Risdall Marketing Group in New Brighton and St. Paul-based Go East Design.

Main challenge: maintaining customer service while growing fast

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