

MAKING THE PITCH

Michigan's Boomdash works to woo more clients

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LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. - Six bottles of champagne are stacked in the refrigerator of the \$1,500-a-night suite. Potential customers had sent in their RSVPs for the invitation-only event. And signs and banners were ready to proclaim the debut of one of Michigan's newest companies.

Tucked away inside a 26th-floor suite of a Disney World-area luxury resort, five employees of Boomdash LLC had gathered on a balmy April evening, full of energy and anticipation for what the next day would bring.

Months of strategizing, software programming and market research would culminate in a nearly two-hour presentation and product demonstration to a room full of Boomdash's potential customers.

"It's extraordinary that things have panned out," said a calm and confident Cesar Nerys, Boomdash's founder and chief executive, as he surveyed the enormous suite.

To ward off competitors, the Ann Arbor-based company had kept a low profile, tightly guarding its plans. But now the wraps were about to come off.

The setting — the annual convention for about 100 independent telephone directory publishers — was ideal. Boomdash is an Internet search engine and mobile advertising company for local businesses. It plans to work with telephone directory publishers, helping them sell Internet marketing services to their thousands of customers around the country.

The company entered the convention with one customer already on board, Sunshine Pages of Metairie, La. But now it must convince other pub-



PHELAN M. EBENHACK/Associated Press

Boomdash executives, from left, COO Doug Neal, CEO Cesar Nerys and CTO Jack Horner launched their Internet search engine and mobile advertising company for local businesses at the Association of Directory Publishers annual convention in Lake Buena Vista, Fla., Thursday.

FOLLOW THE BIRTHS OF 2 START-UP FIRMS



In Michigan's diversifying economy, thousands of workers are starting businesses. Throughout this year, the Free Press will be following two of the state's newest start-up companies.

Today, we look at the formal launch of Boomdash LLC. The other company we are following, RealKidz Inc., has received its first shipment of clothing for plus-size girls and will be featured in next Sunday's Michigan Business section.

■ To see earlier reports in the series, see freep.com/buildingbiz.

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lishers that they need Boomdash's services, too.

Many small businesses encounter difficulties getting their first few customers, particularly ones like Boomdash that require customers to sign a contract. To make things even more challenging, Boomdash isn't offering major discounts to win business like some new companies do. It wants to show potential investors that it can attract paying customers.

Like other entrepreneurs, Boomdash's three partners — Nerys, Doug Neal and Jack Horner — have made a significant investment in their company. Experienced businessmen, they spent a total of about \$30,000 of their own money on Boomdash's launch.

Would the publishers see the value of Boomdash's services? Would they be willing to do business with a start-up company? Would Nerys and his team leave the convention in despair or excitement?

The next day arrives all too quickly.

8:30 a.m.: Boomdash's Web site, www.boomdash.com, goes live for the first time. The company issues its first news releases.

10 a.m.: Using a 72-inch flat panel television in the suite, Nerys and Neal, Boomdash's chief operating officer, rehearse the presentation they will make this afternoon.

"The only time I'm nervous is when I'm not prepared," Neal says. "I think I feel pretty good."

Horner, the company's chief technical officer, discovers that a computer bug has infected part of Boomdash's software programs. But no need for panic. The problem can be easily fixed.

Suddenly, the men drop what they are doing, startled by the arrival of an unexpected visitor. A big turkey vulture perches on one of the balcony chairs, peering in the window.

"I think he's saying the competition doesn't stand a chance," Nerys jokes.

2 p.m.: Inside one of the hotel's medium-size meeting rooms, Neal and Horner check the audiovisual equipment and inspect the room's lighting and acoustics. They realize they need to add two more wireless connections for their laptops.

Boomdash's signs adorn the room, with dozens of goodie bags for attendees in one corner and snacks in another. Kim



PHELAN M. EBENHACK/Associated Press

Corcoran, a meeting planner Boomdash hired, has placed a company brochure and news releases on the tables in front of every chair.

Twenty minutes before the presentation, Nerys, Neal and Horner go outside, huddling together to offer some last words of encouragement.

"It's just very exciting to be in this particular moment," says Nerys, a former AT&T executive.

4:16 p.m.: Neal asks everyone to take a seat, and the presentation begins in front of 29 people. Boomdash had mailed 100 invitations, and 35 publishers said they would attend.

Though the publishers face intense competition from Internet companies, the only thing most of them have done is put copies of their print directories online. But using Boomdash's services, publishers can offer their advertisers so-called Web landing pages with interactive features, such as cell phone coupons and a "call us now" button.

Boomdash's technology places these ads on prominent search engines such as Google and analyzes the results, constantly updating keywords to make the ads more effective. Most small businesses lack the time and knowledge to handle Internet ad campaigns by themselves, much less make sure the ads are working.

"This is not a defensive play folks," Nerys tells the publishers. "It's an offensive play. Take your territory back from your poachers."

During the product demonstration, Neal adds a moment of fun by giving everyone instructions on how to receive a cell phone coupon for the hotel's café.

Much to the relief of the Boomdash team, several publishers ask questions at the end of the presentation.

Then the company holds a drawing, giving away an iPhone, iPod Classic and an

iPod Nano. In Boomdash style, cell phone text messages alert the winners.

"When you come with us, we are not going to love you and leave you," Nerys tells his audience. "We look forward to engaging with each and every one of you."

Later, after the attendees have left, Nerys says happily, "Confidence was what I was trying to project. I was in a groove. I was in my zone."

6:20 p.m.: Two potential customers sign up for appointments.

6:48 p.m.: The Boomdash team enters the convention hall for a welcome reception. The company paid thousands of dollars to host the event, which features appetizers like crab cakes and meatballs. With wine and beer in hand, the team mingles with publishers.

9:02 p.m.: After a long day, the Boomdash team heads back to its suite, tired but pleased. "I just want to sit down," Neal says in the elevator.

The Boomdash signs and goodie bags now decorate the suite. Minutes later, a publisher from Michigan and some employees at Sunshine Pages, Boomdash's first customer, arrive for snacks, drinks and socializing.

9:20 p.m.: Nerys pulls out one of the bottles of champagne and toasts Sunshine Pages.

Midnight: An exhausted but hopeful Boomdash team turns in for the night.

Meeting with publishers

After a slow start the next morning, Boomdash gains momentum in the afternoon, meeting with seven publishers. Five others have set up appointments for the next day.

The publishers ask intelligent questions. Some give Boomdash new ideas. One wants a bigger share of the company's revenue.

"This has been a heck of a day," Nerys says in the early evening, breaking open another

Boomdash CEO Cesar Nerys, left, talks with Jacqui Ponkey of Genesis Publisher Services of Traverse City and Todd McKnight of Names and Numbers of Pittsburg, Kan., before the Michigan firm's Florida product launch.

Boomdash execs

Who are the guys behind Boomdash LLC? Here's a look at the backgrounds of its three partners:

CESAR NERYS, FOUNDER AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Career experience: Previously served in key roles at AT&T Business Services, including director and general manager and area vice president. Prior to that, he was a global accounts director at British Telecom and a multinational accounts manager at NCR. Before joining Boomdash, Nerys had served as CEO of Openworld Inc.

Education: B.A. in fine arts, New York University.

Age: 55.

Family: Wife, one daughter, two sons.

Residence: Dexter.

DOUG NEAL, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

Career experience: Cofounder and former CEO of Mobile Automation Inc., which iPass Inc. acquired. Before starting Mobile, Neal served as director of engineering at Symantec Inc. He began his career as a software engineer at Hewlett Packard Inc.

Education: B.A. in computer science, Central Michigan University.

Age: 42.

Family: Wife, three daughters.

Residence: Brighton.

JACK HORNER, CHIEF TECHNOLOGY OFFICER

Career experience: Previously served as vice president of engineering at Cinemanow Inc. and Mobile Automation Inc. Horner also has worked in a variety of roles at Symantec, Central Point Software and CyberMedia.

Education: B.A. in philosophy, Whitman College.

Age: 42.

Family: Wife and one son.

Residence: Thousand Oaks, Calif.

er bottle of champagne. "I know we are going to be able to help these businesses."

The team gathers in the suite for a toast.

"Fabulous day!" Nerys says while the others cheer.

By the time Nerys and his team leave Florida, they have received verbal commitments from nine publishers. That's a good start, but plenty of work lies ahead.

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