

And now for something completely different:

HEEBONICS

Toronto entrepreneur creates social networking for a cause



By EZRA GLINTER
Special to The CJN

Among the many victims of the economic crisis, charitable organizations have been particularly hard hit. But one innovative Toronto entrepreneur is stepping in to help fill the gap. David Katz, a former communications and marketing consultant, launched Jackthedonkey.com in March as an online social networking site. Unlike most ventures of its kind, however, Katz's site donates more than half of its advertising revenue to non-profit organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, Ronald McDonald House and the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada.

"Even the charities that people might think are established, they're really struggling right now. These are the ones who are trying to make a better world for all of us, and I would hate to see them lose the momentum they've been creating," Katz said.

A graduate of the Schulich School of Business at York University, Katz spent 10 years working as a consultant while volunteering for organizations such as the Special Olympics. After a while, however, he found himself looking for a more meaningful full-time career.

"I was leading a fairly conservative life, you go to work, you go home, and I realized there wasn't a lot of value in what I was doing in the corporate world," he said.

Inspired by his involvement with non-profit organizations, he hatched the idea for Jack the Donkey in September 2008, and decided to make it his main occupation.

"I see so many people spending so many hours a day on social networking sites, and it's such a good opportunity to make some money for charities," he explained.

Jack the Donkey started as a simple picture-sharing site, but based on the encouragement of its initial users, Katz decided to turn it into a full-fledged social networking venue. Now, in addition to sharing photos, users can meet and interact with others on the site, both those they know offline as well as those they don't.



David Katz

"The whole idea was to create a social network where you just so happen to be making money for the charity of your choice," Katz said.

When users register, they are able to choose from a list of charities to benefit from their time online. Each page view generates two cents, Katz said, with 55 per cent of that going directly to charity. So far, 15 non-profit organizations and about 500 users have signed up.

In addition to reaching out to non-profit organizations, Katz also recruits advertisers himself, rather than relying on third-party agencies. So far he has drawn most of his support from local Toronto businesses, but he believes that as the site grows it will provide a unique advertising venue.

"The whole theory behind Jack the Donkey is that there are a lot of really rich corporations that sponsor golf tournaments or stadiums and so on. Here companies can sponsor on a smaller scale and have a big impact in terms of good will," he said.

Online social networking sites are a hot-ticket item at the moment, but starting up a new one is not so simple. While Facebook and Twitter have become Internet juggernauts, the once-mighty MySpace has been losing ground and others, such as Friendster or Orkut, are barely even on the radar any longer.

Katz, however, believes that Jack the Donkey has an approach that distinguishes it from its more entrenched competitors, aside from the obvious draw of supporting worthwhile causes.

While Facebook has been the most successful social networking site to date, it doesn't provide users with enough of an opportunity to interact with those outside of their own social bubble, Katz said. Jack the Donkey, he believes, takes an approach that is more in tune with the frontier mentality of the Internet, where the possibilities of interaction are more open.

"My whole issue with Facebook is that I got

bored with the same people seeing the same status updates. We're trying to push people towards meeting other people on the site," Katz said.

"We've created a website that provides you with a lot of the functionality of Facebook, but

you're not going to be limited to your clique. There's an element of randomness, kind of a choose your own adventure, where once you click on one profile you are exposed to a new group you wouldn't have found as easily in some other communities," he added.

In this respect, Katz is inspired by Twitter, the micro-blogging platform that allows users to post updates of 140 characters or less.

"Facebook is where you go to meet people you know, whereas Twitter is where you go to meet people you want to know," he said.

With Twitter, however, Katz found it difficult to keep up with the high volume of updates, and he believes that Jack the

Donkey can provide a more manageable middle ground.

"It provides you with that shotgun approach of Twitter, a much stronger opportunity to actually network and meet people. But on Jack the Donkey, it's not quite that hyper energy," he said.

Besides being useful and enjoyable for users and raising money for charities, Jack the Donkey also has a broader mission of getting people interested in worthwhile causes, as well as helping non-profit organizations reach out to a larger public.

"We want to use the whole soft-sell approach to get people involved in fundraising, activism, volunteerism," Katz said.

"There's so many different causes out there that are important. I think it's an opportunity for all of these different charities and causes to work together and create something special."



Jack the Donkey founder David Katz lends a helping hand to struggling charities.