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Adam Fendelman and Brad Spirrison

## **Podcast, Vol. 48: Expansion of Sittercity in Chicago**

*In this MidwestBusiness.com podcast, Adam Fendelman and Brad Spirrison discuss the growth of Sittercity in Chicago to other markets beyond securing babysitters from the Internet. How is the Web-based service “safer than hiring the girl next door”?*

**Adam Fendelman** Welcome back to MidwestBusiness.com Podcast. Adam Fendelman here, with Brad Spirrison. This week, we're talking about a couple of successful entrepreneurial women, and we had one in the news last week and one in the news this week. First of all, Brad, who are they?

**Brad Spirrison** These are two of several examples of very impressive women entrepreneurs. They are Genevieve Thiers, the founder of Sittercity.com, which is now a seven-year-old company that leverages the web to find a babysitter online. It's a \$3 million-plus company as of last year, but from what I understand, growing at a much more rapid clip there. Now that she has been successful finding babysitters, she's getting into all areas of online caregiving, i.e., find a petsitter, find a senior sitter, find a plant sitter – whatever – all online. It seems like they're doing a good job growing in verticals without getting overextended.

[...]

**Adam Fendelman** In terms of Sittercity, they make the statement that they're safer than hiring the girl next door. How do their customers feel that way if this is essentially an online service and you're not meeting them?

**Brad Spirrison** Sure. They're, of course, going to make the statement because they're trying to sell it. And that's their argument, so... if someone were to make that statement 10 year ago, they would have been

laughed out of the room. Five years ago, maybe a couple of people would have raised their hands. But if you look at communication and social networking technologies where you can really get a deeper understanding of screening and who you're meeting – you can get pictures, profile information, audio testimonials, etc. – anyone that allows anyone else to watch their kids, obviously, there's a bit of anxiety and some degree of risk, but if you think of all of these attributes that the Web provides, and the proverbial girl or neighbor next door, I'm not sure one is necessarily better than the other, but you could certainly see the same playing field.

**Adam Fendelman** Have you heard any stories where the babysitter match hasn't worked out, and whether or not that happened, what would the company do in the case of something that would go awry?

**Brad Spirrison** Needless to say, that's not something they'll send a press release out to inform the media, so I don't have any specific comment on that. Obviously, any kind of business like this, if something were to go bad, you would think that in the particular incident that would be more serious than losing a certain account or transaction, because so much of this is safety- and word-of-mouth-oriented.

They do, and you'll appreciate this, often also at times, in addition to leveraging the Web, do "speed dating" for babysitter events. I don't know if you know anything about that. It's another degree and there haven't been any public cases, and I would think that in any organization, that would be a primary focus of allocating resources to make sure it doesn't happen or to mitigate effects if it did.

**Adam Fendelman** Now, she's running this business also with her husband. Has she talked to you about what that's like, and the pros and cons associated with that?

**Brad Spirrison** They did. Her husband's a pretty prominent fellow in his own right, a guy named Dan Ratner, who has written a few books on nanotechnology and who is kind of a serial investor and entrepreneur. He's actually funded Sittercity – I believe a majority of their external funding has come from Dan and potentially his family.

So, he's the COO, she's the CEO – you can imagine their vacations are a real thrill, right? It probably takes, and this is what Genevieve was saying, three or four days of a decompression period where they can really talk about anything else. I mean, it's an upwardly mobile Web firm where it's hard to get it out of your mind. And if you have a cell phone or communication technology, anywhere you go, in Web businesses in particular, there's no way of getting around it. And so, if your spouse is like that, and you're fortunate enough to come home and your spouse/partner/roommate/whatever is in a different walk of life altogether, it's like a breath of fresh air. It's, "I don't want to think about this. I just want to have dinner, see a movie, watch a Cubs game, whatever."

But because their lives are so diverse, Dan I told you about and Genevieve is also an opera singer, there are these very interesting, fabulous parts of their lives that they do independently, without the other, in addition to anything else they have going on. I think they need to make a very concerted effort, is what she said, to NOT focus on the business, but they have ample opportunity.