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By Brad Spirrison

Online baby-sitting service expands markets

TECH MATTERS | Sittercity.com ready to take care of pets, plants and seniors

If you are comfortable with the idea of exploring the Internet to find somebody to watch your kids, than chances are you would use the Web to take care of most everything else.

This is the educated bet of Genevieve Thiers, who founded the popular Web site Sittercity.com in 2001 and in recent years has expanded her service into other markets. For a monthly or annual fee, individuals across the country can access a local database of caregivers who do everything from walk your dog, to water your plants, to tutor and put your children to bed. While until last year the outward features of the Web site focused primarily on sourcing baby-sitters, chief executive officer Thiers and her 30-plus employees began to seed the newer features internally in 2004.



Genevieve Thiers founded the popular Web site Sittercity.com in 2001.

"We pulled them from inside the site to outside of the site," she said. "They were kind of ripe."

While 30-year-old Thiers would not disclose Sittercity's revenue, it is estimated that the company made more than \$3 million in 2007. Having secured first-mover advantage with a database of more than 150,000 caregivers, Thiers said the next mission is to market to a more mainstream clientele.

"We are safer than hiring the girl next door," she said, adding that plans are in the works for an aggressive advertising campaign as well as international expansion.

While Sittercity to date has not raised venture capital, the company early on was funded by chief operating officer and serial entrepreneur Dan Ratner. In addition to their professional relationship, since last October, Thiers and Ratner have pursued their lives as a married couple.

"We're a two-headed monster," said Thiers, who moved to Chicago in 2002 shortly after founding the company. "We have gotten so close I don't know how I would have run it without him."

After spending 20-hour days growing an Internet company, Thiers and her spouse do their best to talk about things other than work when at home or on vacation. While this is never entirely possible, subjects like Thiers' second career as an opera singer and Ratner's published research on nanotechnology issues help pass the time.

On Thursday, Thiers will discuss her experiences managing her business and audience -- from a female perspective -- during a panel conversation at the TECH cocktail conference, which will be held at the Water Tower campus at Loyola University. More information about the day and night-long program can be found at www.techcocktail.com.

Daytime tech toast

After nearly two years of hosting quarterly soirees for Chicago's virtual movers and shakers, the organizers of TECH cocktail are planning an ambitious and educational program that will focus on how to build and fund Internet and technology businesses in the Windy City (rather than fleeing to the coasts). Speaking on the "How to Find Funding" panel is Colorado-based venture capitalist Brad Feld, who targets early-stage tech firms across the country and was an early backer of Chicago-based FeedBurner, which sold to Google for \$100 million a year ago.

"Events like TechCocktail do a great job of creating a focused way for entrepreneurs and investors in parts of the country other than Silicon Valley to get together, learn what each other are up to, and have fun in the process," said Feld, now a managing director of the Foundry Group and author of a venture capital blog found at www.feld.com.

TECH cocktail co-founder Eric Olson has paid more attention to his organization's own P&L since becoming an associate at Northfield-based venture firm DFJ Portage earlier this year.

"We've gotten pretty good at managing the float, but it would be nice to build a war chest so we wouldn't have to be so stretched out," said Olson, adding that while TECH cocktail has been a fruitful labor of love, he and partner Frank Gruber "have been doing a lot of thinking about the organization and are trying to structure the right way so it can continue to exist perpetually."

Lisle telco firm raises \$27.5 mil.

ExteNet Systems, a network infrastructure firm based in Lisle, recently raised \$27.5 million in debt and equity financing. Proceeds from the round, which included a lead investment from Santa Monica-based Palomar Ventures, will be used to build distributed antenna system networks for wireless communication services.