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Medicine men

Armed with the rights to the hot .md domain in hundreds of cities, pair ready to roll out health sites

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STORY IMAGES

Joe Benza caught a lucky break in March 2004.

An avid domain name collector, he stumbled upon .md just two weeks before a New York broker began selling the domain extension in the United States. He spent the next three-and-a-half years quietly acquiring .md domain names for 300 U.S. cities and the 100 biggest cities worldwide, including **cincinnati.md**.

The .md extension is now viewed as the desired domain for health care information online, according to MaxMD, the exclusive registrar for .md domain names in the United States. And Benza plans to be at the forefront of that trend in September when he and partner Dr. Mike Barber launch **YourCity.md**, an online media company that provides local Web sites for each of the 300 cities with features like listings of doctors and insurance providers, a physician rating system and medical library. They'll launch the sites over the next two years, an effort that will cost millions of dollars to implement. Plans haven't been finalized for the sites in cities outside the United States.

Though costly, Benza and Barber believe the market is ripe and that advertisers will quickly respond to the concept. They're raising up to $5 million from a pool of investors to launch pilot sites in Dayton, Columbus and a yet-to-be determined large city and to hire seven employees to assist with programming and sales. They'll also add new features to the sites like a personalized patient newsletter and online health coach adapted from the research of local medical partners. Future rounds of venture funding or an influx of cash from a large corporate sponsor will help the startup meet its ambitious goal.

"The goal is to improve the quality of health care, which will in turn reduce the cost of health care to the public," Benza said.

After 25 years operating Perfecto Dental Lab in Anderson Township, Benza left day-to-day management in 2004 and focused his efforts on domain names and real estate. He recently developed Miami Township's Torrey Place subdivision.

Benza views his domain name collection the way he views his real estate - as a piece of land. The key, he said, is realizing the potential value of a name. He purchased names for as little as $150 and as much as $5,000. But he expects his entire collection could be worth hundreds of millions of dollars once he launches the sites and builds their reputations. Along with pharmaceutical firms GlaxoSmithKline and Johnson & Johnson, Benza believes he's one of the world's top owners

of .md extensions and the only single company to own an entire city set of domain names.

He feels he's at the front of the .md curve as the health care community has warmed to the Internet and national sites like WebMD have grown in popularity. And domain name brokers have noticed an uptick in medical schools, hospital conglomerates and individual practices snapping up the extension. A recent poll showed that 80 percent of physicians said a .md Web address is either important or very important to their practice.

"Domain names are supposed to be distinctive, descriptive and mnemonic, something you can easily remember," said Scott Finlay, MaxMD's president. "We think .md for health care makes a lot of sense."

The .md domain is actually owned by the country of Moldova, near Russia. But MaxMD acquired the rights to sell it in the United States and 90 other countries in 2004. Naturally, the firm marketed the domain to the medical community because of the widely recognized initials.

The intuitive nature of the extension made sense to Barber, too. When he left his post as CEO of Group Health Associates in May 2006 and Benza contacted him about joining forces soon after, he knew his knowledge and connections in the health care community could provide insight for the sites' content. An entrepreneur, he was attracted to the opportunity to help another startup find success.

"I'm a strategist and am always looking for trends," Barber said. "You've got to be there before it becomes obvious to everyone else, and Joe was."

Benza already had launched the pilot, cincinnati.md, in 2005. But Barber helped him build the site into a portal for medical best practices in the city.

Patients use the site to rate and provide feedback about their experiences at doctors' offices. Doctors then contact these patients to follow up on a question or remedy a problem with the visit. Giving a patient a voice and the doctor an avenue to hear it improves the quality of care, the pair said. And potential patients can use the site to make a decision about which doctor to visit.

Practices like that of Sharonville dentist Dr. James Springer and Dr. Mark Deutsch's Queen City Ear Nose and Throat in Montgomery encourage every patient to visit the site and give feedback.

"We are motivated by this forum," said Jeanine Brailey, Deutsch's practice administrator. "Our physicians are out there in the forefront."

The site has more than 300 registered physician users and receives 200,000 hits per month. Free to both doctors and patients, advertising is what generates revenue. And feedback from large drug, insurance and health care companies has reassured YourCity that will be the case for the rest of the sites, too, Barber said. To help attract those firms, YourCity has hired Empower MediaMarketing to help it devise a marketing plan.

"To drug advertisers, eyeballs are much more valuable, and they can be much more targeted on the Internet," said Jim Price, vice president of media innovation for Empower. He estimated that pharmaceutical companies pay $50 to $100 per 1,000 impressions for advertising space online. Average is less than $15, he said. Other research shows that 116 million people used the Internet to find health information in 2006, up from 41 million in 2001.

Price will help Benza and Barber develop their sites and the health care tools on those sites in order to attract advertisers. In the meantime, the team will continue to get the word out about the important service the site provides to doctors and their patients.

"When we talk to people, they get it. They get excited and see where it could go," Barber said. "The time is right for health care and the Internet to get together."

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