

Full Accommodation

Easy-to-use, self-serve platform at the heart of SignMeUp.com

By Bryan Ochalla

When longtime friends Todd Bellino, Ralph Harrington, and James Peltier put their heads together 13 years ago to come up with an entrepreneurial idea that would allow them to work together, the one that seemed to make the most sense involved them getting into the furniture business—specifically, as the online distribution specialists for La-Z-Boy.

The trio, who were schoolmates while growing up in Monroe, Michigan, didn't have any experience in that industry: Bellino held various regional and national sales management positions at Tenneco in Lake Forest, Illinois; Harrington worked on the trading floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange; and Peltier headed up software development at Matrix Technologies in Maumee, Ohio. But, that didn't stop them from pitching their idea to La-Z-Boy's then-CEO (and also a Monroe native) in 1997.

Unfortunately, the meeting didn't go as well as they had hoped. "We spent a bunch of time coming up with

the idea and making sure it would work," says Bellino, who adds that the trio even formed a corporation, Interactive Catalog, for the endeavor, "but the company simply wasn't ready to go online at that time."

But the three wisely held onto the corporation—and the commerce engine Peltier had created—and a few months later, they came up with another business plan.

Accessible Services

After arriving at a swimming event at the University of Illinois, Bellino and Harrington—who, along with Peltier, have been competitive swimmers since their teens—learned their registration information had been lost. "It was a bad experience for us, but it was bad for the people putting on the meet, too," Bellino says, since they had to deal with long lines while re-registering the dissatisfied duo.

The experience gave Bellino and Harrington an idea. "We got on the phone with Jim and asked him, 'Do you think the commerce engine could be used for event registration?'"

It could, and over the course of the next few months Peltier created the product that has served as the backbone of SignMeUp.com since early 1998.

"When we started, we focused on event registration

for charitable sporting events," Bellino says. Over time, however, the company's many customers asked if it would expand its reach to include other kinds of events. Today, SignMeUp.com's Web-based software and services assist organizations with charitable donations, campaign contributions, overall membership management, and more.

"We built the application to be generic from a vertical standpoint, but broad from a horizontal standpoint," Bellino explains. As a result, "when an organization comes to us and asks, 'Can we use your system to do this?' the answer usually is 'yes.'"

"We've worked hard to provide people with an easy-to-use, self-service environment," he says, adding that "we've never had a physical conversation with most of our customers. They just get onto our form builder, create the forms they need, post them to their Web sites, and start collecting data. At that point, we process their transactions and remit them the monies. That's it."

It's all about "allowing the customer to control as much of the process as possible," Bellino says.

Room to Grow

Although the company has already assisted more than 1,500 organizations since it completed its first transaction near the end of 1998, Bellino says the sky's the limit.

"The first year we were in business, our customers processed less than 5 percent of their transactions through our system. Today, our customers process about 30 to 35 percent of their transactions through our system, which suggests to me that we've got a lot of room to grow, even with our existing customer base."

Bellino and the rest of the staff at SignMeUp.com hope to expand that base in the coming months and years by partnering with banks, ISOs, and processors through their recently launched Data Commerce + program.

"Most of the organizations that approach us are looking for someone to assist them with data collection. Finding someone to assist them with payment processing usually is a secondary concern," he says. Because SignMeUp.com offers both, "we thought there might be some value in providing our toolset to banks, ISOs, and processors, so they can access this particular side of the market, too." **TT**

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