Local firm devoted to developing truly interactive web pages

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If Jacques Habra and Patrick Sarkissian had their way, having to hold the line for a customer service representative would be eliminated for good. Researching a company's products would take minutes and they could be purchased with a few clicks of a button.

They described their solution Tuesday night to a group of 19 University of Michigan students, mainly from the business school, who "wanted to see what all the craze over the Web was about," according to Chris Orzolek, a junior.

Habra and Sarkissian's answer? The Internet's World Wide Web can have web sites with "virtual functionality" — meaning a page that both brings business processes to the computer screen and is aesthetically appealing.

The term was coined by Habra and Sarkissian — who both graduated from the U-M earlier this year and are now partners in Web Elite, an Ann Arbor-based company that designs web pages for businesses throughout the nation.

Habra started the company 18 months ago when he saw that "the Internet was saturated with web sites that were nothing more than templates — that is, text and graphics and nothing else."

Habra, who graduated from the honors college with degrees in English and philosophy, began Web Elite about a year ago on his own. Six month later he joined forces with his friend Sarkissian, whose degree is in English, to expand the business.

Web Elite serves medium-sized businesses — worth $100 million and under — primarily in Ann Arbor but as far as New Jersey and California. While charges vary greatly, charges can range up to $100,000 for an interactive web presence.

HABRA

With the boom of information technology, a company dedicated to creating web pages seems entirely practical, but nothing out of the ordinary. Habra and Sarkissian said most web sites are simply "brochures on-line," whereas the pages that Web Elite creates are interactive — the essential component of virtual functionality.

A person who explores a business's web site designed by Web Elite can check product price quotes, do searches on other product-related data, even order and pay for the products. Typically, most web sites offer little more than text and animated images, they said.

At mention of purchasing products through the Web, potential buyers often see a blinking red warning signal. While

"myths about computer hackers" may make people hesitate to type their credit card numbers into a computer screen, Habra said that giving card numbers over the Internet is actually safer than reciting them over the phone.

A program called a "safe socket layer" encrypts all numbers to a virtually indecipherable code while in passage over the Internet. Users can tell if a web page has a safe socket layer by the universal symbol on the screen: a light blue border with an unbroken key in the lower left-hand corner of the screen, Habra said.

While students like Melissa Cole, a junior business student, are "interested in things having to do with the Internet because it's big for the future," many still shy away from the Information Superhighway, because it "needs to be made easier," she said.

While Web Elite attempts to make its pages easier for curious consumers, interactive web sites are also "a marketing lover's dream," Sarkissian said.

Market researchers can find out which items on the web page were explored with the most frequency and after, which piece of information — a price quote or description, for example — they were purchased.

"When you're driving on the highway and a billboard prompts you to buy a product, the company doesn't know it was because of the billboard. But with a web site, marketers know if an ad prompted you to take action," Habra said.

What is the future of the World Wide Web?

"In five years the standard for web pages will be to have business processes on-line. People will use web pages for calculations and quotes and to chat with other business people," Habra said. "Hopefully we'll be a couple of steps ahead of competitors."