



Web ELITE

What do PBS superstar James Burke, who lives in London, a small start-up dot-com company in West Bloomfield, and international magazine empire Hachette Filipacchi have in common? When they needed websites developed, they all turned to a fledgling company in Ann Arbor named Web Elite and its 26-year-old founder, Jacques Habra.

THINK » SOLVE » REPEAT

Web ELITE

BY TOM HENDERSON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID FRÉCHETTE

Ann Arbor? It's understandable that cashblazer.com, a new company in West Bloomfield that links would-be borrowers looking for business loans with commercial lenders, would link up with Web Elite — they're in the same geographic area and one of Web Elite's first clients is a friend of cashblazer founder Gary Wyner.

But James Burke? Or Hachette Filipacchi, which publishes *Elle*, *Woman's Day* and *Car and Driver*? Or, for that matter, Sun Microsystems, Hewlett-Packard and Wells Fargo, mammoth West Coast companies that also have hired Web Elite?

"Sun Microsystems can spit in any direction in San Francisco and find a company that fits our demographics. And they come to Ann Arbor for us," says Web Elite president Jacques Habra. "We're dotcom-ing the company that dotcoms the world."

All thanks to the worst day in Habra's life in the summer of 1996, when he got a phone message from someone at Ford Motor Company in Dearborn telling him the company had decided to rescind its offer of a job as a computer programmer. "I was devastated," says Habra, who like other recent college graduates was looking forward to going from the semi-poverty of college life to the big bucks of the corporate world.

"I had just sold my old Toyota and was hours from signing a lease on a Ford Explorer. I had a lease on a new apartment in Dearborn and only had four days left on my Ann Arbor apartment," says Habra. "I couldn't believe it. I just pretended I didn't get the message. I showed up at Ford anyway, and they told me to go home. It turns out that when they were checking references, someone told them I had this company I'd started that I was really passionate about, and they were afraid I'd just work there a little while and quit. But that wasn't my plan at all. Web Elite was just going to be something to do on the side. I was excited about Ford because they had talked about moving into management, that I wouldn't be a programmer long."

Instead of running Web Elite part-time, at nights and on weekends, Habra had no choice but to try it full-time. "It was a blessing in disguise," says Habra. Today, the company has become one of the hottest boutique web designers in the industry. It has seven Fortune 50 clients — including, ironically, Ford Motor — and a dozen Fortune

500 accounts. Its staff of 20 will generate more than \$3 million revenue this year. A lease was signed on a San Francisco office in February, and the company has just bought the old Ann Arbor Theater building downtown, renovating it as their new headquarters.

Hachette Filipacchi is a French-based media giant. Habra won a bid last November against some of the biggest and best known Web developers in the country for a project to develop a website for *Car and Driver*, the largest auto publication in the world with a circulation of 1.8 million. The site — 10bestcars.com — was launched in January.

"We were extremely impressed with Jacques and his colleagues. It was clear this was a subject they loved and their enthusiasm was evident," says Steve Harrison, Midwestern ad manager for *Car and Driver* and manager of the 10bestcar website. "They demonstrated an ability to get things done without a lot of direct involvement on our part. They have exceeded our expectations by also presenting some other issues and concepts to enhance the site that we had not anticipated."

Web Elite landed the Sun account — worth \$1 million in revenues in 1999 and will possibly double that this year, involving several complex projects, one that speeds up budget-approval requests for managers, another that links all Sun's 20,000 worldwide employees into a single Intranet — through KLM Creative in Southfield.

Says Kevin Martin of KLM: "Most web developers of Jacques' age have a good grasp of the process, technology and capabilities of the Web, because that is all they know."

"I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. I JUST PRETENDED I DIDN'T GET THE MESSAGE. I SHOWED UP AT FORD ANYWAY, AND THEY TOLD ME TO GO HOME."

What makes Jacques unique is his uncanny ability to see the bigger communication picture. That is, how the Web is not a stand-alone sales and marketing tool, but a major component of a larger program including print, mail, personal contact, etc.

"Most of the time, I get the feeling Jacques is bored at the typical Web development meetings. Then, every once in a while something really challenging comes up and he gets excited. More than once he has come up with really brilliant solutions for our sites," Martin says. "And as strong a personality as Jacques has, he is a true team player."

Habra says that Web Elite's revenues will double this year, a growth curve he's worked hard to keep down. "We're turning away projects left and right. For us to take on a project, it has to be high end, it has to be innovative and it has to be something that will push the envelope," he says. Another factor is his insistence on maintaining the culture at his company, a culture he fears would change too much with faster growth.

"It isn't about getting rich and cashing out, it's about working with people you like on projects you like. We want

"utilize and demonstrate Sartre's philosophical tenets."

"I went to sleep reading *No Exit*, and I woke up reading *The Stranger*," he recalls.

Culture. He was born in Lebanon and lived in Brussels from the time he was two until he was eight, then spent a year in Greece before finally moving to the United States, and Kalamazoo, as a nine-year-old in 1981. (The travel came as a result of father Nabil's career as a Pharmacia and Upjohn executive. His mother, Hedy, is a Spanish professor at Western Michigan and Kalamazoo College.) French and Lebanese were his native tongues, although his English is impeccable.

Culture, and culture shock. When the family finally arrived in the United States, "it was a huge culture shock. Kids yelling at their parents? I couldn't believe it. And the fast food. But there were things I found so attractive right from the start." He says his father immediately fell in love with America's political freedom. The family all become citizens in 1984. The United States, says Habra, is the only place that could have given birth to a company like Web Elite, founded by an immigrant, where talent and imagination and dedication can lead to your dreams ful-

"I WAS FASCINATED WITH IT," HABRA SAYS OF THE APPLE IIC HIS FATHER BROUGHT HOME WHEN HE WAS 10. HE BOUGHT BOOKS AND TAUGHT HIMSELF TO PROGRAM.

to present a small, talented, very creative culture. Every time I think of the next step, what to do next, I think: 'How can we make it less corporate, less political while still growing?' Culture is the root of everything for us. At the end of the day, culture is the key. We could have been a 100-person company by now, but our focus was to bring on people we could be friends with. That takes time. Those folks don't grow on trees. And, being small is an advantage for the client. You always get the A-team."

Harrison at *Car and Driver* agrees. "It's nice having the key person at the vendor involved in your project. You wouldn't get that at a larger firm."

Culture. Over a series of in-person interviews and e-mails, it is repeated as a kind of mantra. Both in terms of the feel of things at his company, and in the way his life has evolved. Culture has always been paramount. This is, after all, a computer programmer who disdained computer science courses while at the University of Michigan.

"It was so cut and dried; I couldn't go at my own speed. It was take Computer Science I, and then take Computer Science II and so forth," says Habra, who graduated with a double major in English and philosophy and whose senior honors thesis analyzed how Kafka's characters

filled. Ultimately, who knows? An Initial Public Offering? A merger? Wealth seems a foregone conclusion.

In the meantime, he's 26 and willing and able to enjoy life. Last winter he toured the impossible beauty of Costa Rica. Thanksgiving found him in Paris. It was Cabo San Lucas in Mexico for the Millennium. No 100-hour weeks and nerdlike devotion to company at the expense of all things beyond the office.

Habra's affinity for computers began when he was 10 or 11 and his father brought home an Apple IIc, a marvel of its time. "I was fascinated with it," says Habra. He bought books and taught himself to program. The universal binary language of zeros and ones had special meaning. "Every time I would code something, it bridged the culture gap and the language gap," he says.

He was anything but the geek in the basement who didn't have friends. His parents insisted on balancing athletics and sports. "Whenever my sister or I would achieve something in one discipline, they'd immediately ask us about another. If I did something in English class, they'd say, 'How are you doing in science?'" And, being European, it was natural they fostered a love for soccer.

And it was on a soccer field where, as fate would even-

"BEING SMALL IS AN ADVANTAGE FOR THE CLIENT. YOU ALWAYS GET THE A-TEAM."

tually reveal, he'd meet Christopher Dooley, who is now Web Elite's chief operating officer and manager of the San Francisco office.

They were about 12, and had just played on opposing teams in an American Youth Soccer Organization game in Kalamazoo when they struck up a conversation. "I had just got done schooling him in soccer," guips Habra.

They would later team on the tennis court. They were doubles partners for four years at Kalamazoo Hackett Catholic Central High School, where as the school's

number one team, they were runners-up to the state champions their junior year. They went off to Michigan together, but soon went their separate ways as Chris entered the fraternity world. Chris, too, pursued an interest in computers. After college, Chris was director of technology for a western Michigan company, needed a website created, had heard Jacques was in the business and gave him a call. It was late 1998. Serendipitously, Habra was looking for a COO. He countered Chris's request for a website with an offer of a management job and an equity position, and within a week, they were partners.

Though he'd been a philosophy and English major, while at Michigan, Habra had continued to learn everything he could about computers. He worked his way through college in a variety of computer-related jobs on or around campus—as a computer consultant in the Executive Education Center, where he debugged code, designed software and eventually managed some 100 employees; as Chief Information Officer when he was 20 of Branch Information Services, an early internet company; and as a consultant for Wolverine Access, a web-based system for students wanting to access grades or reports.

While working for the university in 1995, he and other techies would surf the Web "looking for cool sites." They found an Armani site, a rather plain, ordinary site. Word was it had cost \$500,000 to build. "I was floored," says Habra. "In no way was



Jacques Habra and Web Elite staffers. Top row, left to right: Adair Renning, Shengdar Tsai, Katherine (Kat) Byrnes, Christopher Murphy, Lynn Fiorentino, Michael Cody. Bottom row, left to right: Timothy Maun, Elizabeth Windram, Tom Bigwood, Kaleb Walton, Michael Zaleski, Steve Owsinski.

the site a technical marvel. I could have made it a marvel in 40 hours. So, I said, 'I'm going to create websites, and even if I do them for \$1,000, I'm going to be famous.'"

His first site was for Jaya Travel in Southfield. He got paid \$600, then turned around and subcontracted the work out to a friend for \$125. He thought he had found the secret of life. Then, just after getting the bad news from Ford, he landed his first major account, a site for Trendway, a Holland furniture manufacturer, for \$75,000.

Just to keep things interesting, Habra has even founded a second company, noospheric.com, a software development company making shrink-wrapped software for web-based marketing and product sales. *Noospheric?* It's the phonetic equivalent of the French words for our world, named in honor of a French philosopher Habra respects, Pierre de Chardin. Chardin's book, written in 1946, is about how the world is coming together and evolving into collective thought.

"Which, when you think about it, that's the Web," says Habra. Noospheric is on hold for now, while Habra continues to build the Web Elite brand, but if he ever gets bored...the world awaits. ■