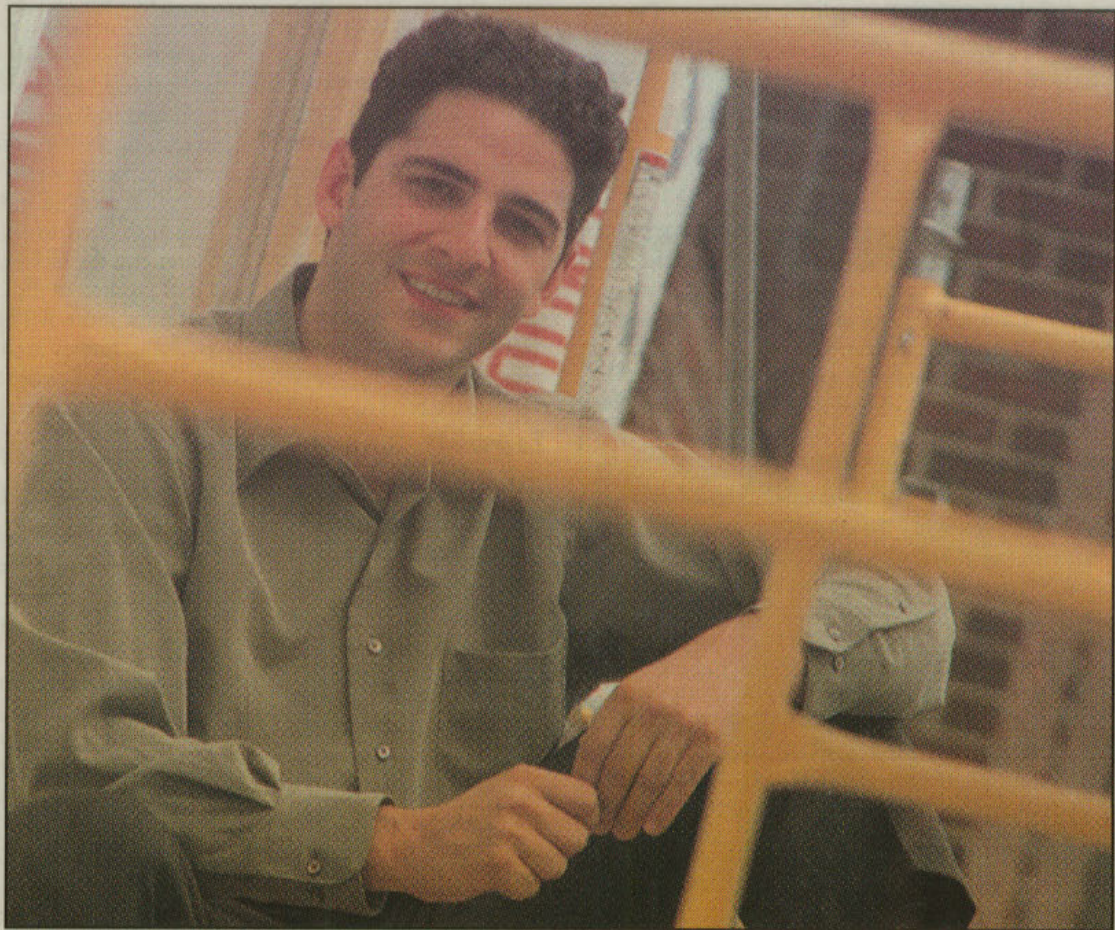


Insider

BUSINESS JOURNAL

NOT JUST ELITISTS



IBJ photos by Chris Boyd

Web Elite's CEO Jacques Habra sits on the scaffolding during the renovation of the newly purchased building that was formerly the Ann Arbor Theater One and Two.

Web Elite grows with the cyber times

August was a big month for Web Elite, the Ann Arbor-based e-business company that has developed tailor-made web sites for Car & Driver Magazine, Ford Motor Company, Volvo and Sun Microsystems, among others. Before month's end, Web Elite moved into its new headquarters, hired Tom Hollyer as COO, and launched worker-equipment specialist Carhart's new web site.

20TH-CENTURY THEATER HOME TO 21ST-CENTURY MEDIA COMPANY

"Located in the heart of downtown Ann Arbor, our new headquarters was formerly a two-screen movie theater," said Jacques Habra, the company's CEO and founder. "We find it ironic that a 20th-century media icon like a movie theater is now the headquarters of a 21st-century, new media e-business firm.

"We will house our development teams here in Ann Arbor as we support our regional offices in New York, San Francisco and Phoenix. We have been on a continuous growth curve over the last few years that is averaging around 400 percent annually. Ramping up to meet the ongoing needs of our clients is a constant priority. We have just surpassed 25 employees locally in Ann Arbor

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and the new space has become available at just the right time."

Moving from leased facilities on Fifth Street in Ann Arbor, Web Elite purchased the Ann Arbor Theater One and Two, renovating the two-story building for the company's new base in downtown Ann Arbor. Habra calls it "artsy but functional."

"It's really exciting for us," Habra said. "It's a diametric change from what we had." The 12,500-sq-ft office has an industrial feel, with walls manufactured from steel, acrylic and birch. The flooring is galvanized steel. Habra says he couldn't get the approval for installing a fire pole between floors, so they settled for a staircase. The complex will support 110 employees.

New lands

Discussing the purchase, Habra noted that the final decision had a lot to do with the desire to settle in Ann Arbor for the long-term. "Most people at our stage would reinvest into branding, into more marketing-related things. We're trying to reinvest more in people, in property that is tangible, reinvest in technology," Habra explained.

"Business is always going to be out there. All the statistics of the growth regarding the Internet is that it is growing by incredible numbers every year in all different facets. The name of the game is methodology, and it's people that make production work and make it work effectively. So we're building those assets right now, and obviously space is a big factor."

Habra bought the building personally to protect Web Elite's liability in case there were any problems with the building down the road. "Also, I personally believe in Ann Arbor and wanted to make a serious personal investment."

"One of the things we noticed is that when you graduate from college, you want to get away from home. You may want the option to live in another city. So we've instituted a program where employees can have a tour in San Francisco for a year. They can then go to New York. We want to keep them here (in Ann Arbor) as long as we can. It's natural to want to move away to go to the coast."

Habra's intention is to help his employees experience life outside of Michigan, but to have them come back to stay.

New leaders

"This next year is going to be a good learning year," Habra said. "Tom Hollyer is our COO. Running a company is very different than building a company. The CEO role is so different than a COO's role. A COO deals with operations, deals with people problems, deals with the purchases, investment decisions on a day-to-day basis... The CEO is looking in terms of, 'What space of the marketplace do we want to be in? What markets do we want to go after? What products do we want to design? And then how do we represent the company properly?' Basically representing the culture."

"The COO is really in charge of making sure things are getting done and that people



The development team works in a cluster setting in Web Elite's open environment.

are happy and that the whole organization is sound. I've been doing both of the roles... The problem, I think, has been that I lack life experience. I'm 26. That's what Tom's bringing to the part - lots of life experience. He can help make sure operations are in order."

Hollyer's first encounter with Web Elite was as a customer, when he served as vice president of Fitch Design.

"We needed help building a site for a client in St. Louis," Hollyer explained. "We called three or four different web developers in Ann Arbor. [Web Elite] did remarkable work for us. Fast, reasonably priced. They brought ideas to the table when the other firms didn't."

"Then we collaborated with [Web Elite] on some other projects, none of which were high profile except for *Car and Driver*," Hollyer continued. "There are developers everywhere. The price ranges are all across the board." But Fitch Design was impressed by Web Elite's innovative streak. What set them apart from other developers was, in Hollyer's words, "creative thinking."

And "creative recruiting," Habra added. "That's part of the reason why we bought the building versus just leasing it. You can't get much better than this. You can't be closer to campus. We have a human resource pool that is second to none in the United States, and, you know, that's a big reason why we're here. We can access that pool right when they join the university, keep the relationship going at an internship level and bring them into our full-time or management staff."

"That will be the name of the game in the next five years: how well do you maintain the relationships with the community to tie to human resources."

A new launch

Web Elite launched Carhartt's new web site this month. The site is now live at

www.carhartt.com. Lynn Fiorentino, Carhartt project manager, said they wanted to include the complete Carhartt product line on the site. None of their retailers sells the company's complete line of merchandise, so their customers aren't aware of all that Carhartt offers. By making information on their full line available online, they're hoping that their customers will pressure local retailers to expand the range of offerings.

Fiorentino also told Web Elite to make the site interactive. Carhartt wanted an engaging and visually rich site that was entertaining as well as informative. "Personally, I think the section called 'Carhartt Interactive' is the coolest part of the site," said Amy Kennedy, Web Elite's director of marketing. "You get close-ups of durability of the products, such as how the fabric stands up to rain, how the seams act when pulled on, etc."

In addition, Carhartt wanted to strengthen customer bonds and share the story of Carhartt the company. The site captures the company's all-American feel. And online

highlights like "Rugged Tales and News," featuring real-life testimonials from satisfied Carhartt shoppers, and "Sponsorships & Events," listing schedules for Carhartt-sponsored timber-sports and bull riding competitions in the United States and Canada, are intended to promote loyalty and cement positive

relationships with their customers.

"Carhartt also wanted the ability to add, modify and delete as much of their own content as possible," Kennedy added. "They can make changes to the site as often as they'd like, whenever they want, without contacting us to do it. This is a really big benefit in terms of functionality and value to the client."

The success of the Carhartt job offers further proof of Web Elite's commitment to high standards and customer satisfaction.

Story by John E. Aho



Interface Architect Tom Bigwood programs a site while in the comfort of the upstairs part of Web Elite's new office.

"That will be the name of the game in the next five years: how well do you maintain the relationships with the community to tie to human resources."

Jacques Habra