



Friday, July 17, 2009

Startup pitches cloud-based marketing service for small and midsize businesses

By Jim Schakenbach, Special to Mass High Tech

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A four-month-old startup hopes to change the face of small to midsize business marketing using cloud computing and a proprietary technology that features something called a "strategically timed auto recognition engine."

Starting out with a focus on small and midsize businesses (SMBs) in the insurance industry, Helmsman Marketing LLC of Concord aims to provide marketing resources that normally would be far beyond what those businesses can do for themselves, said Tim Haller, CEO of marketing technology for Helmsman.

According to Haller, the company's Star Engine enables SMBs to develop sophisticated marketing campaigns featuring strategically timed elements such as direct mail, e-mail, voice mail, fax and text messages. Using a software-as-a-service (SaaS) business model, the Star Engine replaces traditional in-house marketing departments with a virtual cloud center that uses the client's own customer database and simple directives to prepare, launch and manage an automated multimedia marketing campaign at a fraction of the cost of a

traditional in-house program, said Haller.

Sheryl Kingstone, director of customer experience at Boston-based market research firm Yankee Group, noted that until now web-based sales assistance for SMBs was limited to CRM tools such as Salesforce.com and Protus IP Solutions' Campaigner, which can provide things like e-mail marketing but can't coordinate an entire marketing campaign, and require the customer to do the heavy-lifting themselves. "This is the software plus the service," she said, "which is a great idea."

Started just four months ago on a small angel investment, Helmsman Marketing is run by co-founders Haller, formerly VP/general manager of Cambridge-based sales training consultant Basha Strategies Inc., and chief marketing officer Jim Jackson, founder of Global Graphic Management of Acton.

The two said that, after years of sales and marketing experience, they realized that small and midsize businesses are often handicapped by a lack of sales and marketing resources when trying to compete against much larger firms. In particular, they recognized a serious challenge faced by local independent insurance agents after relatively recent insurance reforms opened up the Massachusetts marketplace to large, national insurance companies selling directly to consumers.

Jeff Carbone, president of Jeff Carbone Insurance Agency Inc., agreed. His company is a \$3 million independent agency, with locations in Natick, Melrose and Hanover facing serious competition from national insurance giants such as Geico and Progressive Casualty Insurance Co.

"We needed a cost-effective way to touch our customers on a regular basis and notify them of important dates for things like license and registration expirations and policy renewals," said Carbone. "The best way for us to compete with the big boys is to kill them with customer service."

According to Haller, the Star Engine enables SMBs such as Carbone's to do just that,

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providing a "five-touch" automated notification and marketing program often for under \$2 per customer, depending on the number, design and delivery costs of the various elements. "We started out developing a CRM program but realized that our potential customers didn't have the interest or resources to run something like that, so we developed the Star Engine and took all of those marketing tasks out of their hands, lowering their costs while increasing their productivity," Haller said.



Jim Schakenbach is a freelance writer in Jefferson.

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