

Breakfast with Brody

Scarsdale power broker brings together Internet hopefuls and business vets for hard-boiled advice and sticky buns

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New York - Exhibitors at the sprawling PC Expo computer show in Manhattan hawk just about every manner of software and hardware. But Alan Brody peddles talk.

Banners on his booth proclaim, "Schmooze or you lose." Visitors are told of breakfasts of bagels and fruit, some sticky buns and coffee. And the cost of these less-than-spectacular breakfasts: \$50 to \$70.

But Brody, somewhat of a business, marketing and high-tech impresario, has molded a mini-empire out of the bagels and sticky buns.

He regularly brings together internet-savvy entrepreneurs who know little about business development with business veterans who know little about the Internet. The result: Power breakfasts that are increasingly known throughout the industry for helping start a good number of dot com businesses while convincing other aspiring Internet moguls that their ideas are lousy.

Gary Arlen, a veteran Internet analyst in Bethesda, Md., said Brody's conferences are not the only events of their kind. "But his breakfasts have taken on a life of their own," Arlen said.

Such a life that Brody has fashioned a business, based in his Scarsdale home, out of the gatherings.

Brody was for 10 years an advertising and technology columnist at Advertising Age, a popular trade publication. He then started a series of high-tech conferences and events that included an interactive advertising gathering and an awards show for technology ads.

With all that behind him, he makes references to feeling old compared to the Internet mavericks with whom he deals. He will only say that he's in his early 40s.

As PC Expo drew to a close yesterday, he said no one should be surprised by the shakeout among Internet-related businesses that are losing funding, laying off employees and closing.

"Like in any other industry, there are many people here with great ideas and plenty with horrible ideas," he said. "For some reason, everyone felt that anything could succeed with the Internet. Well, it can't."

Brody's business is called - for the combination of the Internet and the food - iBreakfast. The first get-together was held in December 1997 in a Manhattan hotel, drawing about 70 people. Meetings have been held every month since, drawing on average 250 people, and sometimes reaching as many as 500.

Monthly breakfasts are now also held in Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. There's talk about expanding the business, privately held and with four employees, to London.

Through the breakfast fees, which he acknowledges are modestly high, along with monthly mailings and a Web site, Brody said the

business - unlike many Internet start-ups - is profitable. He declined to elaborate.

Whatever money the breakfasts bring in, they've often drawn top Internet and business people, including executives from Priceline.com, Barnesandnoble.com and Bear Stearns, along with Internet luminary Esther Dyson and TheStreet.com's Jim Cramer.

The breakfasts begin before 8 a.m., which Brody said is early enough to give established executives a chance to drop by before heading to work. At the same time, it's so early that younger people with just an iota of an idea and little conviction stay away.

"Young people just hate to get up early," Brody said.

Elaborate meals are not served because it would detract from mingling. "If you want scrambled eggs, you'll have to go someplace else," Brody said.

The breakfasts feature keynote speakers, venture capitalists, seasoned business executives and a mix of people with hopes for the Internet.

The budding entrepreneurs bring small ideas, burgeoning thoughts and well-grounded business plans. What they don't bring is money. Often the venture capitalists and business people don't have a clear understanding of what the Internet start-ups hope to achieve.

"You let them talk and sometimes new businesses evolve, and sometimes nothing evolves," Brody said.

The moment of truth comes when the Internet hopefuls have exactly five minutes to present the core of their business concepts to a panel of three business executives and venture capitalists. With everyone listening, the panelists then decree what's good - and what's bad - about the presentations.

"It was brutal," said Russ Straub, who launched in Boston an Internet site for mortgage brokers. "We knew we weren't ready for prime time, and they confirmed that." The panelists said they could not see the potential in the site, and that the business plan was not compelling.

"It was very humbling," Straub said.

But Straub and his partner - both veterans of the mortgage business - listened, and brought in an expert at start-ups. After months of work, Straub said the breakfast helped him win a \$40,000 prize for the best business plan among 150 submitted to Northeastern University.

After an equally tough experience before another panel, Robert Granader said iBreakfast also helped him better understand venture capitalists and their demands. And funding has begun coming in, Granader said.

Before it did, Granader, a Bethesda, Md., resident, started marketresearch.com to sell research reports to business. He thought he knew his stuff, but almost fell apart before the panel.

"I was terrible," he said. He couldn't catch his breath and he wasn't focused. The panelists said he had to concentrate on what need his site would fill. "And they said to smile more," Granader said.