

CollectiveX's Online Group Service Scores Power Partnership With NRG

By *Debbi Mack*,
STAFF WRITER

Clarence Wooten has been called a "serial entrepreneur" and it's easy to see why when you look at everything he's done. Currently, Wooten is CEO and founder of CollectiveX, an Internet company at www.collectivex.com that allows individuals or organizations to create free public or private group sites for social or business purposes.

CollectiveX provides a powerful information sharing and networking service, allowing users - from individuals to membership organizations to companies - to form online groups featuring discussion forums, communal calendars and file sharing, among other things. CollectiveX can also be used to form social networks. The company's various public group sites can be viewed at www.groupsites.com.

Wooten's inspiration for starting CollectiveX came after years of helping create and run other businesses. In fact, he got an early start, founding his first company, Envision Designs, while studying business at Johns Hopkins University. After that, he co-founded a series of technology-based firms throughout the '90s, including his first Internet business, ImageCafe, launched at the height of the dot.com boom. Only seven months later, in November 1999, Network Solutions/Verisign acquired the company for \$23 million. After serving as a vice president for Network

Solutions, Wooten moved on to found Wooten Ventures in 2001, and later co-founded and was general partner for Venturepreneur Partners, an early-stage venture capital firm.

An Easier Way

While working at Network Solutions, Wooten discovered there was no easy way to network with people on an individual basis "short of taking each one to lunch, which is impossible." In creating CollectiveX, he said, "I was ... trying to solve a problem that I had. I was really looking at the Web closely and I realized the Web had changed dramatically. ... [It] had become much more communal and interactive than it had ever been before - at least in 1999." He also realized that the Web had reached a point where a company could grow much faster by online word-of-mouth than in the past.

Since late May 2006, when the service first became available, CollectiveX has enjoyed amazing success. Wooten said that almost 7,000 organizations have created groups powered by CollectiveX. At least 200 groups in Howard County use it, including several community associations and the Howard County Chamber of Commerce for its Young Professionals Network. And almost 200 new users join CollectiveX every day, he said.

The basic CollectiveX service is free, so its revenue comes from a variety of sources: advertising placed on group sites; premium features, such as extra

storage capacity, the ability to create ad-free groups and group "branding" capability; and the "enterprise model" for users needing multiple group sites under one umbrella, such as membership organizations with multiple chapters or companies with several departments. Examples of CollectiveX clients using the enterprise model include Baltimore County Public Schools, Georgetown University's pediatric alumni and the American Chemistry Society.

Of Mutual Benefit

Wooten's achievements have not gone unnoticed. Articles about him have appeared in *Forbes* ASAP, *Entrepreneur* magazine, *CNNfn*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Fast Company* magazine, and he's been profiled in the *Baltimore Business Journal's* "Top 40 under 40." Babson College, U.S. News & World Report's top-rated college for entrepreneurial programs, has done a case study on his experiences.

Wooten got involved with NRG when he saw how the group could benefit from CollectiveX's services. "I've known Mike Weiner for years," he said.

NRG has been particularly good for CollectiveX, and vice versa, Wooten said, because CollectiveX is highly complementary to NRG's mission. NRG uses CollectiveX to create more than 65 group sites for each of its networking groups. And one direct benefit for CollectiveX is that NRG members have used it to start their own

groups for work or other purposes.

"I think networking is critical in general," Wooten said, but NRG has been particularly valuable because of its "group-centric" approach, specifically its practice of "complementary networking within groups." He believes that having small groups of noncompeting business owners share information is highly empowering and that other, bigger organizations that don't group people together aren't achieving that sharing dynamic as easily.

"I like people. One of my favorite aspects of being in NRG is the people - meeting other people who are interested in networking and actively seeking to help each other out."

Wooten also likes the NRG summits and CollectiveX has participated in them. He believes they provide an excellent opportunity for members to showcase their businesses.

"I'm very passionate about building companies - particularly tech companies." Whatever the future brings, whether it's with CollectiveX or a new venture, Wooten said he'll be happy "as long as I can build companies that impact people in a positive way" and help them make money.

Interestingly, Wooten started off college majoring in architecture, but anticipated he'd be dissatisfied in that field and switched to business.

"As an entrepreneur, I feel I am an architect," he said. "But more of an architect of companies."