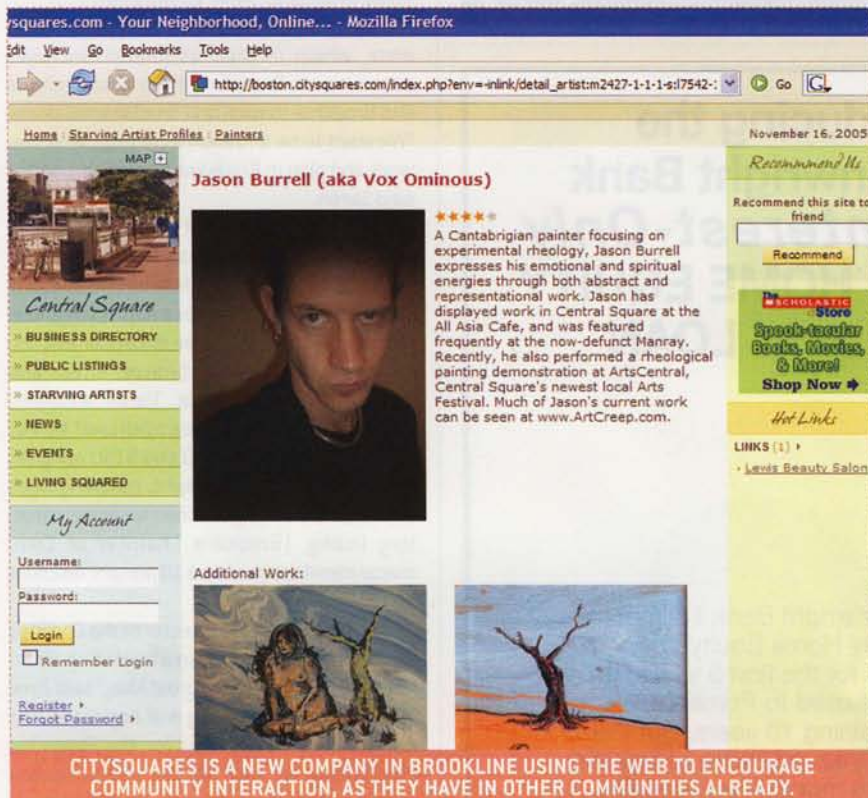


'Square roots' here Online community grows



By Kristen Paulson

BEN SAREN AND CHRIS MILLER LIVE IN SOMERVILLE BUT THEY RECENTLY—AT LEAST VIRTUALLY—MOVED TO BROOKLINE. THE PAIR FOUNDED A WEB PORTAL, CITYSQUARES.COM, THAT PROVIDES AN ONLINE DIRECTORY OF NEIGHBORHOOD BUSINESSES, AS WELL AS RESOURCES THAT INCLUDE COMMUNITY NEWS, EVENTS, PUBLIC SERVICES, CLASSIFIEDS (CALLED 'LIVING SQUARED') AND GALLERY LISTINGS, AMONG OTHER RESOURCES.

Launched October 15 in Davis, Porter, Harvard, Central, Kendall, Inman and Union Squares, Citysquares.com recently expanded to Brookline's Brookline Village, Coolidge Corner, Washington Square, Cleveland Circle and JFK Crossing neighborhoods.

"Brookline wore us out," joked Saren, Citysquares.com's President, from the firm's offices in downtown Boston, as he described the process of preparing to expand their services to Brookline's squares. He and Chris Miller, Director of Promotions, have been wandering

around town, building alliances with Brookline artists, art gallery owners and others.

The self-described "local boys," are already familiar with, and enamored of, Brookline's neighborhoods. "Brookline is amazing; it appeals to different demographics. You can take your wife to dinner there on the weekend, have brunch, or go for a walk with your children," said Saren. "What sets Brookline apart is enthusiasm, passion and a pride that's almost unparalleled. It's an eclectic, diverse city with two sides: one urban, edgy and cul-

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turally diverse, the other homey, genteel and peaceful."

Citysquares.com hosted a table at the Brookline 300th Anniversary event, which took place November 13 in Larz Anderson Park. The mix of attendees at the event embodied the demographic that Citysquares.com hopes to attract. "There were lots of people from out of town—Cambridge, Somerville, Waltham, Watertown and England. People in Davis Square don't know Brookline," Miller pointed out.

Citysquares.com hopes to tap this audience, which in their estimation includes people new to Brookline, those who commute into Brookline to work and Brookline residents. "We want to be a resource for folks who live, work and play in Brookline's neighborhoods," said Saren.

Of course, they are not a charity.

Although each business located in a particular square receives a free business listing that includes their business name, telephone number and address, three enhancement levels and price points—bronze, silver and gold—are also available. These additions allow merchants to choose additional services that cost between \$50 and \$150 per year, including adding photographs, company logos or a hosted Web page to their business directory listing. (Brookline Chamber of Commerce members receive a 10 percent discount on enhancements.)

Joe Zina, Executive Director of the Coolidge Corner Theatre, invested in a beefed-up directory listing. "I think it's a great idea," said Zina. "Citysquares.com is very well organized. The site offers an ideal way for the Brookline community as well as the metro Boston community to connect with Brookline businesses." Zina also hopes it will mean even more exposure for the theatre's Web site, www.coolidge.org. Allen McPherson of Philips Television also signed on. "The site is strictly targeted to locals," said McPherson, "who are our target." Citysquares.com's services are free to consumers; artists have the option of creating a free profile or choosing a more detailed profile for an annual fee of \$50.

Citysquares.com aims to distinguish itself from existing online services by its focus on small business. The company hopes to preserve and invigorate the community with the site, reconnect people with their neighborhood and give non-traditional, eclectic businesses the exposure they may not have. "Many people are not aware of what's around them or right down the street," said Saren.

Saren also feels that the site's ability to consolidate in one location all the goods and services for one square, such as its post office,

library and town services, distinguishes the site from its competitors. Somerville recently wanted to add its Conservation Commission to its listings; Citysquares.com was happy to comply.

"Citysquares.com appeals more to the locality; the competition have done the broad strokes; you can type in a zip on other sites and you'll find everything and anything related," said Saren, who describes Citysquares.com's approach as 'granular.' "We'll fill in the detail work of geographic locations they [the competition] might not be able to penetrate like Brookline Village, Coolidge Corner and Davis Square."

Local roots

THE IDEA FOR THE SITE took root when Saren could not locate a barber in Davis Square. "This literally was the second time I needed something like this and it didn't exist and I didn't get it. It came down to saying, 'I'm gonna do it,'" said Saren. Before founding Citysquares.com, Saren was founder and president of Atomic Enterprises, an IT services company; Miller worked for a financial investment company. "This is much more rewarding so far," said Miller. Saren feels he is carrying on a family tradition. "My family has been running local businesses in urban neighborhoods for three generations. My grandfather promoted his résumé printing business on Wall Street in 1936 by having Bowery residents walk around the city with a sandwich-board," said Saren. "We are the online 'sandwich-board' for local businesses."

Expansion planned

SO FAR, CITY SQUARES.COM'S business listings have received the most hits. "People are craving a way to find a resource or a local business in their neighborhood that they didn't know existed, such as a salon that specializes in a certain technique, or clothing from local designers," said Saren. The site is evolving and will expand to other major neighborhoods such as Dudley Square; Citysquares.com will also develop new features such as an online welcome wagon. "One thing we've heard consistently from consumers to hipsters to government is, 'Wow. This is so obvious I'm surprised it hasn't been done yet,'" said Saren. He hinted that the site would soon offer mobile consumers features that match their mobility—wherever they happen to be. ▲

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