

Neighbor dissing neighbor is a big hit on the Internet

by Roger Showley

Two young men on opposite sides of the globe, one in Australia, the other in San Diego, were fed up with the actions of their neighbors, but instead of moving away, they moved to do something about it online.

THE GRIPE VINE - Plugging away at his laptop in San Diego's University City neighborhood, Brant Walker founded RottenNeighbor, a Web site for people to rant and rave on about their neighbors. CNS Photo by Earnie Grafton. In San Diego, Brant Walker, 27, couldn't stand the smell of spicy Asian food wafting continually into his apartment from his neighbors' kitchen on the other side of a wall.

"They had some bad smelling cooking going on," said Walker. "It was not very pleasant in the summer. When it's hot, they always opened their doors and windows and the smell traveled over to our apartment. I couldn't get rid of it."

And thus was born RottenNeighbor.com last summer. Besides inconsiderate cooking habits, complaints often involve noisy dogs, family spats, apparent drug use and late-night car repairs.

Walker's day job is running the Web site for a eating-disorder and drug-rehabilitation clinic. But he said RottenNeighbor.com may morph into a full-time job, thanks to a venture capital and management firm, Attenunit.com, that now owns RottenNeighbor and is ramping up the service with 20 people in Austin, Texas, doing the technical work.

In Australia, Jason Spencer, 35, bought a home five years ago in a nice area of Melbourne, the capital of the state of Victoria. But he wasn't complaining about the neighbors - they were complaining about him.

"Shortly after we moved in, we had all sorts of problems with the neighbors," he said in a phone interview. "They complained about noise. One neighbor complained about our air conditioning; the kids were noisy all

the time. They were the kind of neighbors that complain about everything."

After complaining himself last year about what he felt was incessant carping to his brother Adam, 27, Jason hit upon the idea of inviting neighbors everywhere to opine about their immediate surroundings and make such micro-level comments available to outsiders to read.

"My brother said to me, 'Would you have moved there if you had known all this before you moved in?'" Jason recalled. "I wish I had known about it - and then the light bulb went off. 'We've got to do something about that.'"

And so, six months later, after consulting with a raft of lawyers and Web designers and forking out \$3 million in pre-development costs, StreetAdvisor.com launched in February.

The brothers' main moneymaking venture is providing technical services to the Australian mortgage industry.

It's an age-old problem, whether it be ranchers arguing over fence lines or the limbs of a tree that intrude into a next-door yard.

In the pre-cyberspace age, neighbors were more likely to meet each other face to face - either on the street, over the fence or, at the extreme end, in court - to hammer out their disagreements.

Those really impolite ones, who didn't want to be neighborly, would make crank phone calls, throw eggs at the front door or hang toilet paper all over the place. And truly mean ones would poison the dog, cut the phone lines or commit assorted acts of vandalism or harassment.

But now, when many would rather text-message and e-mail than - gasp! - talk to a live person in person, they can vent to others through RottenNeighbor and StreetAdvisor.

"I think people are afraid of confrontation in this day and age," Walker said. "People like to hide behind the Internet. Why make friends in real life when you can make them online?"

He admits that he had not summoned up enough courage to simply knock on his neighbor's door and ask what's cookin' and, perhaps, offer a room deodorizer.

"They don't speak English," he commented, vaguely.

MULTITUDES

Apparently, the bad neighbor thing is a big problem.

The StreetAdvisor site has been visited by more than 1.2 million people from 26 countries. They have provided 35,000 contributions and 60 of them won free iPods in a contest for best entries posted about their streets.

RottenNeighbor logged several hundred thousand hits in just a few weeks and Walker has been interviewed

by newspapers around the globe.

"One thing we all share in common," Walker said, "is most people have had a bad neighbor in their lives."

Curt Rant, a real estate salesman, found out about StreetAdvisor after it was introduced to the U.S. at a July technology conference in San Francisco.

"I think it's a pretty cool site from the standpoint that as soon as they get enough traffic, it will allow people in a neighborhood or community to access it themselves. That's, in a way, very Web 2.0," Rant said, referring to the interactive, consumer-generated content direction of the World Wide Web.

Rant is labeled as an "expert" on the RottenNeighbor site because he commented on his own block and answered a consumer's question about the future direction of real estate in Southern California. He hopes it will lead to customers in his realty business but also enable agents to help buyers explore places to live.

"This type of service, if it catches on, could provide insights to people at the street level so they can get a good feel for what matches their preferences," he said.

Signing up for StreetAdvisor is free and obligates no one to provide any information. If they choose to, they can describe their street (individual addresses are discouraged from being listed for privacy reasons) and recommend useful services and companies, from doctors and libraries to numbers to call during a blackout.

Jason Spencer said this feature prompted him to move all the contact info from the door of his refrigerator to the online "Street Board" listings.

"I can share that with my neighbors," he said. "It's much easier to communicate."

Participants can also write a "review" of their street and "vote" on quality-of-life issues by sliding a bar along a 5-point scale in five broad categories: StreetVibe, Wired, Health, Value and Essentials.

Prudential Realty agent Tim Ragland, going by the screen name SanDiegoRLTR, wrote a review that said of his neighborhood, "It has a very friendly mixture of people, wonderful restaurants, crazy nightclubs and fun, funky shopping. Great place to hang out if you like high energy."

To cover costs, Spencer said advertisers can buy space for \$20 per month.

"Our goal is to get everyone on every street on the planet (to sign up)," he said.

Walker admires StreetAdvisor and says he hopes to offer other features on his site besides the gripe vine.

"You will be able to rate your neighbors, good as well as bad," he said, modeling the idea after the RottenTomatoes.com movie Web site.

Users are free to specify exactly who or where the stinky neighbors are and, he said, this information might make it easy for law-enforcement officials to detect cases of child and spouse abuse.

"If a guy is beating his wife, I'd hope someone would pay attention to it and get him off the streets," Walker said.

Like StreetAdvisor, RottenNeighbor has implemented a "profanity filter" to screen out foul language and can delete false accusations as needed.

"Victims can flag that," Walker said, and Web masters will change things on a case-by-case basis. "Hopefully, the community will be able to regulate this, much as any other online community."

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