

# Behind the screens on building up a business

*A Henrico County firm teaches companies how to market themselves online*

**T**he executive director of the Greater Richmond Small Business Development Center wanted a flashy introduction page to its new Web site, but Alyah Rafeh had a better idea.

"People want the information," she explained to Mike Leonard at a recent meeting inside the Greater Richmond Chamber of Commerce, of which the small-business center is a part. "They want to get down to the nitty gritty."

With that, the idea for a catchy Web page was scrapped.

Not more than two minutes later, Leonard and his business partner signed off on Rafeh's plans, green-lighting her development of the chamber's "CoPilot" Web site, which will assist early-stage, small-business owners.

Rafeh, 29, is director of operations at Activenation Inc., a Henrico County firm founded by her father in 1996 to offer Web-development and Internet services. With Rafeh at the helm, Activenation has essentially become a new business, providing marketing and branding in addition to the Web services.

Young and energetic, she returned to the United States last year after a five-year stay in Beirut, Lebanon. It's the country of her family's roots and one with decades of political oppression.

When Rafeh came on board, "basically, we started from scratch."

Rafeh spent her childhood in the United Arab Emirates. The family was forced to leave after Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990. They moved to Richmond, where they had family.

By the mid-1990s, Rafeh's father was running three companies before starting Activenation.

Rafeh later graduated from James Madison University and moved to Beirut for what she thought would be a year. In June 1999, during her first year there, Israeli jets bombed the city's power station. The bombings were in retaliation for Lebanese guerrilla attacks in Israel, which is south of the country. Rafeh was impressed with the resolve of citizens, who were terrorized and left in the dark.



Alyah Rafeh, director of operations at Activenation Inc., a Henrico County-based Web development company, talks with Greater Richmond Chamber of Commerce clients Mike Leonard and Natalee Miller at chamber headquarters.

"The next day it was like nothing happened," she recalled. "I remember walking in the street and it was packed with people. Life went on as normal."

While in Beirut, Rafeh helped develop the e-marketing arm of Saatchi & Saatchi, a global advertising agency.

In 2003, her father had heart bypass surgery, and doctors advised him to slow down.

## **Back in the U.S.A.**

Rafeh returned to the U.S. early last year.

She began running her father's online art gallery, PostPicasso.com, which Activenation was operating. The Web-development company survived the dot-com crash but was winding down its last project as her father prepared for retirement.

"I knew Activenation was the future," Alyah Rafeh said, "but I just didn't know how to approach the situation."

By the end of summer 2004, she had created a new business plan for the company with her e-marketing and advertising experience.

Rafeh refocused Activenation, hired two employees and incorporated branding and marketing into Web-page programming.

That concept, however, is fairly common. And it's one that offers Rafeh a heap of local competition.

## **A Lot of Turnover**

"In our industry, a lot of people come and go," said Dennis Pace, president of New Age Digital Inc., a Web-services firm in Richmond. "Any time I want to know how many competitors there are, I look in the local phone book to see what's changed from last year."

Not only do businesses provide Web development, but independent programmers can typically offer lower-cost services from their home as a second job.

Web sites can be a company's first exposure to new clients.

But there is more to online design than just coding a Web page, said Brian Butler, president of Roundtable Creative Inc., a Shockoe Bottom ad agency that incorporates graphic design,

branding and marketing with Web development.

"It's a really cohesive effort to put the two sides of design and programming together," he said, and designing a page can cost from a few thousand to tens of thousands of dollars.

Rafeh said the competition is what makes the business fun. She added that Activenation diversifies itself by working with clients who may not know their exact needs.

"We are a technology company but also a marketing firm," she said. "Our ideal client is one we can grow with companies that really take an active interest in marketing, that want to see value and return on investment in their Web site."

## **Welcomed a Client**

With that in mind, Rafeh welcomed Electrical & Lighting Solutions Inc., one of the first clients under her new business plan.

The Richmond-based specialty contractor needed an upgrade from the Web site template it purchased, which seemed like a quick and cheap solution at the time.

"You're dead without a Web page anymore," said Scott Tubbs, vice president of the company, which provides lighting and electrical services for local organizations. "As we grew, we wanted a much more polished project out there."

Through a business partner, Tubbs and his colleagues found Activenation.

A new Web site was developed this year, and Tubbs said the two firms' relationship is expanding to meet the needs of his company, such as allowing clients to log in and order online.

"What I always tell my potential clients," Rafeh said, "is no matter what business you're in, if your competition has an outstanding Web site, you're hurting if you don't."

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