

PAUL FRANSON | What's Upvalley

FreeRun shows steady growth putting Napa Valley online

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By PAUL FRANSON
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Today, both wine lovers and tourists naturally turn to the Internet for information, but when Heidi Paul and Frank Forbes launched the site that evolved into NapaValley.com back in 1994, the Web was virtually unknown.

The couple, then both working in Silicon Valley, wanted to escape the corporate rat race -- and to do so by putting Napa Valley online.

It was an uphill struggle to convince wineries and inns to sign up, but their persistence paid off. It's now the most popular Web portal into Napa Valley -- and other wine regions as well. Now many inns and B&Bs get a substantial number of their bookings from people who see listings on NapaValley.com and similar sites, and it's a rare winery that doesn't market its products over the Web.

Paul and Forbes' company is now called FreeRun Technologies, and it's grown from offering listings of tourist attractions in Napa Valley to a whole collection of Internet services for wine, travel and other companies.

While many Internet companies have crashed and burned, Freerun continues its steady growth. It now has 30 full-time employees, and is looking for Internet-savvy additions. And it just moved from a cramped 5,000 square foot office on Jefferson Street to an expansive 15,000 square foot site by the airport vacated by one of the Internet's failures.

Two companies in one

Freerun Technologies has two divisions under one roof. One is the portal, the WineCountry.com network of sites; the other is the agency division, which specializes in oth consulting, design, marketing and technology.

"We strive to be a comprehensive Internet solutions company," said Paul, "because most companies currently address each component of the Internet as separate projects, and they lose sight of how to approach it from a strategic nature to maximize their overall business goals."

Under the overall umbrella WineCountry.com, it leads viewers to about 600 inns, wineries, restaurants and other attractions in Sonoma, Monterey, Santa Cruz, Mendocino and Santa Barbara counties. Each year, more than 2.5 million potential visitors click on these Web sites.

One of Freerun's long-term customers is the Beazley House, Napa's oldest B&B. Owner Jim Beazley says more than half their business comes over the Internet. Freerun produces the inn's Web sites, and it advertises on NapaValley.com.

Beazley notes that the Internet has evolved over the years, and Freerun has evolved with it. "At every turn in the Internet, they've been on top of developments," he says.

Another satisfied customer is Vintage Estates, the company that owns Villagio, Vintage Inn, Vintage 1870 and Cucina a la Carte in Yountville. Company spokesman Steve Andrews says Vintage Estates has been using Freerun for designing its Web sites, Web hosting and advertising on WineCountry.com sites. "We've been working with them for more than five years," he says, "And they do an exceptional job."

While the various regional travel portals are the most visible part of Freerun Technologies, there's a lot more to the company. It also has an Internet "agency" patterned after traditional advertising agencies and offers a full range of design and implementation services as well as hosting Web sites for a wide variety of companies. About half of Freerun's business comes from wine companies, the rest from other companies including finance and professional services.

A background in chips and bytes

Spend a few minutes with its founders, and you know these are serious techies, spouting as many industry buzzwords as fruit flies over a wine press. That's hardly surprising, for Paul and Forbes come from technical and technical marketing positions. The pair was working at IPL, a communications company, when they started their business in 1993.

Forbes, 46, is a technologist who worked at Intel and Memorex. Paul, 43, is a marketer who started with the pre-divestiture Bell system, then joined Telex for broader marketing opportunities. They met when Oklahoma-based Telex merged with Memorex, then became IPL.

Forbes, however, chafed under the corporate yoke, and looked for other opportunities. Being interested in wine and fairly close to Napa Valley, he decided to put Napa Valley Online.

He left his corporate job, and developed the initial ideas in the couple's apartment, visiting wineries to promote it by day, writing the complex code then needed for Internet sites at night. "We had to spell 'Internet' to the secretaries when we tried to set up appointments," Forbes recalls. "The people on AOL got the idea, but in those days, AOL users didn't have access to the Internet."

Finally, he persuaded Paul to help him -- for a summer. "That's been a long summer," she now admits.

Their site was first called "Napa Valley Virtual Visit," a name they changed as "virtual" became reality.

"Part of what we had to sell was trust," notes Paul. "Fortunately, some people were willing to try, and the results blew their minds."

Many happy clients

Among Freerun's satisfied clients is the relatively small Swanson Winery, which had the company create and manage an Online store, and has helped the winery with the design of its Web site. "We're very happy with them," says wine club manager Kara Trail. "We've gotten many orders through them, and everything runs smoothly."

A much bigger client is Diageo Chateau and Estates Wines. Freerun designs its multiple Web sites, implements them and hosts them online. They include AboutWine.com, EatDrinkDine, the Sterling Vineyard site and others like that for B&G, the big French brand. Though AboutWine was conceived as a site for the trade, it has evolved into a popular location for consumers to learn more about wine.

Diageo also has a extensive Web site for its trade partners, notably distributors, stores and restaurants and design firms and other agencies. This site is protected by a password, but allows its 4,000 registered users to obtain photographs and other images, brochures and product descriptions, ads, lists of products, technical information, details of transitions between vintages and even full Power Point slide presentations distributor sales reps can use when they call on their customers at stores and restaurants.

Tara Thomas, Diageo's online service specialist says the companies have been working together since 1998. "We're very happy with them," she also says. "They're very accommodating and they'll do anything you ask them to do."

Another big customer is Trinchero Family Estates, parent of Sutter Home and other popular brands. It was one of Freerun's early customers, and like Diageo, Trinchero has worked with Freerun since 1998.

Manager Steve Koetzner says Freerun hosts Trinchero's six Web sites, one per brand, as well as its corporate site. He's especially pleased with its reliability. "Their uptime is phenomenal."

Trinchero also advertises on its NapaValley and SonomaValley sites, which he says bring the right, up-market customer into its tasting room.

Developing new technology

Many of the concepts we now take for granted were new when Freerun began, and Forbes had to develop things like banners, statistics and even a program to tell site visitors what time it was in Napa Valley.

The firm's services went beyond Web design and hosting to marketing and technology including e-commerce. Paul and Forbes had to educate their customers and sometimes correct what they had learned from others. "Hits" were the early measure of success, but first Freerun had to convince customers that "page views" were more important, and ultimately sales or actual visits to tasting rooms or stays in inns.

As the company developed technology its own staff could utilize, it realized it could expand it for use by others. Now it offers a collection of software applications under the overall name of UniFide that it licenses to customers so that they can develop and update their sites.

UniDox, for example, allows customers to update multiple web pages and even sites with a single entry. UniPix allows them to manage their digital image inventory. UniBlast manages e-mail campaigns from a simple screen based on a familiar Internet web browser.

Their newest product, UniShare, is designed to help create and manage "extranets," the private Internets used by companies and their business customers. The extranet at Trinchero Family Estates, parent of Sutter Home, allows distributors and their sales representatives to order, check inventories, obtain the latest sales literature and even create sales presentations for specific stores and restaurants.

No direct competitors

With its broad offerings, Freerun has many competitors, but no direct competitors. Dozens of individuals design Web sites, many host sites, others specialize in e-commerce, and plenty provide Internet technology. But none offer the suite Freerun does.

The founders consider that one of their biggest strengths. "There's a lot to be said for dealing with an agency that offers a whole solution, not just the pieces," says Forbes. "If you just buy the pieces, they often don't work together well."

Some of their biggest frustrations, in fact, come in convincing their clients to understand and put enough resources into the Internet. "The best clients are the ones that are best educated about the net," says Paul.

And those are the customers Freerun seeks. "We want long-term clients," notes Paul. "We can't afford to run off to Tahiti; we need them for the future!"