

FreeRun Designs Technology to Meet Winery Web Needs

By Paul Franson

Many wine lovers and tourists turn to *WineCountry.com*'s network of winery and regional Web sites when buying wine or making plans, but few appreciate the advanced technology behind those sites.

Those sites, like the technology, is the product of **FreeRun Technologies**, a wine-oriented Internet company that not only survived the dot-com crash of the last few years, but is prospering in spite of it.

The Web sites are only the visible part of FreeRun. Behind it lies a whole array of technology designed to meet the needs of wineries--and related businesses as well. Much of it is so new they don't even have slick sales literature, but wineries already report satisfaction with its operation.

A Pioneer in Wine on The Web

FreeRun had its origins in Silicon Valley in 1994, when couple **Heidi Paul** and **Frank Forbes** wanted to escape the corporate rat race at the high-tech company they worked for, and decided to do so by putting Napa Valley on line. That evolved into NapaValley.com.

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 California's wine country.

Now many inns and B&Bs get most 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, many on sites developed and maintained by FreeRun.

In the process, FreeRun has evolved 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 5000 sq.-ft. office on Jefferson to an expansive 15,000 sq.-ft. site by the Napa airport vacated by one of those failures.

Three Companies in One

FreeRun Technologies is really three interrelated companies under one roof.

Under the umbrella WineCountry.com, it leads viewers to about 600 wineries, inns, restaurants and other attractions in Napa, Sonoma, Monterey, Santa Cruz, Mendocino and Santa Barbara.

It also has an Internet 'agency' patterned after traditional advertising agencies offering a full range of design and implementation services. It also hosts web sites for a wide variety of companies.

About half of FreeRun's revenue comes from the wine business, the rest from other companies including finance and professional services.

Perhaps as significantly, it develops sophisticated Internet technology allowing its customers to make sure all their Internet communications and marketing efforts work together.

A Background in Chips and Bytes

Paul and Forbes were working at **IPL**, a communications company, when they started their business in 1993.

Forbes is a technologist who worked at **Intel** and **Memorex**, Paul 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 both went to IPL.

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

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.' "It's been a long summer," she now jokes.

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 are **Swanson Winery**, which had the company create and manage an on-line store, and has helped the winery with the design of its webs 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 company 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 an 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 and 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 its 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 *Napa Valley* and *Sonoma Valley* sites, which he says bring the right, up-market customer into its tasting room.

FreeRun also works with Web designer **Bryan Maecker** to create sophisticated web sites with new Flash technology that provides exceptional graphics and multimedia content. Hands-on designer Maecker says he's very happy with FreeRun, and would recommend them to anyone.

Koetzner says he's especially adamant that Trinchero's web sites appeal to consumers, not mix material of primary interest to the trade with content aimed at consumers. To ensure this happens, Trinchero has a separate Extranet, too.

Developing New Technology

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

The firm's services soon evolved 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 to wineries and other companies.

E-commerce for Wineries

FreeRun Technologies offers two approaches to e-commerce for wineries, 'order form,' and 'shopping cart.'

Both feature a customized 'look and feel' blending and matching a winery's other web site pages, a follow-up thank-you message to the customer for purchasing, adding the customer's name to a

database for future use, and provision for product discounts, restricted shipping and calculation of taxes.

They also include a patent-pending method of retaining surfer information to expedite reordering, an alternative to Amazon's 'One-Click Shopping.'

FreeRun's *order-form model* requires less commitment with a low cost implementation of E-commerce. It's a simple purchase and check out system with an easy way to add, edit and delete offerings. An example can be found at <https://commerce.FreeRun.com/cgi-bin/authorized/www.staglinfamily.com>.

The *shopping-cart model* allows online accounts, unlimited ways of expressing product and shipping discounts and recognition of wine club members and other features. Examples are at <https://commerce.FreeRun.com/sutterhome/store/index.html> and <http://www.stclement.com/wine/current/hmcab.html>.

E-commerce Products

FreeRun also offers a suite of software applications under the overall name of **UniFide** that wineries can use to develop and update their Web sites. UniDox allows customers to update multiple web pages and even sites with a single entry. In technical terms, it's an XML-based web site content management application.

UniDox lets customers maintain their web site content by simply filling out online forms and publishing changes immediately with the click of a button. The user can insert, modify, and delete text, images, and lists as desired in a few or large number of website pages.

FreeRun customers for UniDox include **Flora Springs Winery, Cannery Row, eOne Global** and **eConvergent**.

UniPix allows customers to manage their digital image inventory. It lets users log on securely, then search for, review and download images for publication. It's very versatile; the technology is used to maintain nearly 20 million images on the **Webshots Gallery** and **Seagram/Diageo** is a user.

UniBlast is used to create and manage e-mail campaigns from a simple screen based on a familiar Internet web browser. It employs HTML templates to compose visually attractive messages with images and text and sends them to easily created, maintainable and customizable unlimited address lists.

It allows users to schedule dates and times for mailings, tests messages for resemblance to spam, displays comprehensive statistics on results, and enables streamlining of address lists via one-click deletion of any or all bounced e-mails.

Wine Vision employs UniBlast to achieve response rate seven-times better than direct-mail when it was soliciting a slogan, for example.

FreeRun's newest product is UniShare, designed to help create and manage 'extranets,' the private Internets used by companies and their business customers.

The Extranet at Trinchero Family Estates, for example, 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.

It's not managed by FreeRun, but Trincherro's Koetzner notes that FreeRun is developing "really cool tools" for trade sites.

UniShare lets wineries share electronic information easily and securely using a familiar Web browser. This information can include allocations, sales information, marketing and POS materials, sell sheets, and presentations in audio, video or Flash technologies. It works with computers running all common operating systems, including Windows, Mac, Linux, Unix, etc.

The interface can be customized to appear a natural extension of a company's public website, and even allows unauthenticated users to access selected information, such as letting the press download collateral material and photographs.

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." **wbm**

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