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Zenvoy: Connecting Business Users With One-On-One Connections, With Bill Webster



Story by Benjamin F. Kuo

Most professionals know that networking is the key to building their business and finding new opportunities, but don't necessarily know how to go about doing so effectively. A new, Los Angeles-based startup, **Zenvoy** (www.zenvoy.com (<http://www.zenvoy.com>)) is looking to change that, with a service that helps match professionals with one-on-one networking. We spoke with **Bill Webster**, Founder and COO of Zenvoy, to learn more about the company.

What is Zenvoy?



Bill Webster: Zenvoy, is the go-to, one-on-one networking startup for professionals in LA and across the country. We're really focused on one-on-one connections between two people, and in particular matching professional service providers and the like, who are complementary, based on their age, their discipline. We want to connect professionals who can relate to each other, and where there's a complementary relationship, where you offer something I need, and I offer something you might need. That's missing in the marketplace, and LinkedIn is not doing it. We've create a startup that puts values in high end connections, to people directly, which makes their life easy and super simple.

What's the story behind the company?

Bill Webster: It's very interesting. I actually graduated from grad school, and came back to Los Angeles. I have a background in architecture, and although I'm a fellow service provider, it's not like I am a lawyer or something like that. However, when I came back to LA, my family members run the ACG, The Association for Corporate Growth, here in town. As you might know, they're a trade association, and it's all about getting people networking together with deal makers. I told them, I'd love to join something like this, because I need to make more contacts. They do something where they throw your business cards in a pot, and help match you up, and have lunch or a call. I thought that was really neat.

They were running this on a Excel spreadsheet, and I thought—you know, you could apply that to different industries, rather than just professional deal makers. There are many people who are in design or engineering who live and die by referral business I started mocking up the idea. Although I'm not a technical founder, my background is in architecture, and I can make Photoshop sing. I started mocking up what I wanted, and as I went around Los Angeles looking for an angel to help me out to build this, I stumbled upon another gentleman, Leo Gestetner. Leo already had a preexisting company in this business card exchange world. He was doing what Evernote does, letting you exchange business cards with a cell phone. But, that business was floundering and not doing well. I happened to come to him for advice, about finding a technical advisor, and where to get a developer—and half way through our conversation, we said—you know, we could pivot his business into this one, and he already had a team with technical expertise. He asked me to come on board, to help us turn the ship in a different direction. I looked at him, and his old company, and told him—I think you're solving the wrong problem. Although people love business cards, it's not about the business card, it's who I am giving that business card too. From there, we took Zenvoy 1.0, and turned it in a completely new direction with version 2.0, about thirteen months ago.

What's wrong with the way people network now?

Bill Webster: Our whole mission started by connecting service providers, such as the lone wolf accountant, but in the last twelve months, that's totally changed. We've found that trade associations, alumni associations, events, and conventions, have become our clients. Any organization which has common interests and members and attendees has become our customer. The reason for this, is because the entire mission statement as an organization, is to provide networking value to members. That could be anything from a golf club, to a tennis club, to a trade association. They need to keep people engaged and involved, so that they sign that check and re-up on their membership. The reason why they became our clients, is because they needed a way to allow their members to get networking value out of the organization, even for the 80 percent of people who were not going to events. What Zenvoy did, is we said great—we know who your attendees are, we know who your members are, and we can help customize a networking environment for your members. We can provide introductions to your members behind the scenes, with little work and little tending by those organizations. They essentially set up their networking, and allow their members to join a community. They go through an onboarding process, where they specify things that they do professionally, and we run that through our algorithms, which we let organizations customize to their need. For example, they might decide to introduce people who are left handed and like the color blue. Although that's an outrageous example, that's an example of the differentiation we offer up to clients, to make sure that each of their introductions are highly contextual, so that it supercharges the value for all of their members, from our client's perspective.

It looks like you're just in LA now?

Bill Webster: We're actually all over the country. Although it's tough to grow that kind of service with the public, early on, it's a lot easier to grow it with private communities. A trade association might join, and they end up creating these independent groups all over the country. For example, ACG might join, and they might have a few chapters in Los Angeles, a few in New York, one in Chicago, and so we are growing by creating these small little galaxies and solar systems. Going forward, we're using these private organizations and events to help seed the nation, and allow them to start to crack open those closed off solar systems to create a giant galaxy. For example, they might want to introduce their community in New York with their group in Boston. So we're connecting this nebulous net, of mostly private groups, but they can allow their members to reach out independently of the group to meet other people. So, if you are in New York City, but do a lot of work in LA, so you might want to meet people in LA. So, as we roll out and go forward, we want to slowly crack open these independent solar systems, and create one giant universe all over the country and the world.

What has been the hardest challenge for you to conquer so far?

Bill Webster: When we first started doing this, our mantra was to assume less. Assume that people will do less, assume that people will pay attention less. You can't make it complicated, or rely on an app, with our customers, who are really busy. If you try to lock them into an app, they'll never come back. We figured out that if you keep making them coming back to an app to update something you would lose them. We figured this out with our first beta test. That really helped us figure out how to design the product. I think the big trend is, with so many apps, people just don't want to do that anymore. There are too many apps.

They're undated. However, if you're at the office, you're probably using Outlook. We came to the conclusion, to push value, we needed to push connections to people through the technology they use every day. For 80 percent of those people, they are reading emails sent to Outlook. We also offer an app, but we were very careful along the way of not creating something that was isolated, and not changing our user's daily habits. If we did that, we would have just lost participants. We had to take a step back, and say, even though it's cool to have an app, what is our primary mission as a company? It was to provide a very valuable connection to two people. It's that one on one connections, and getting it out there to users, and allow them to use whatever technology they want to connect. It might be through Zenvoy, it might be through LinkedIn, it might be through email, or it might even be a phone call.

Finally, what's next on your radar?

Bill Webster: We have tons of stuff on our radar, and we're cracking open a new vertical every day. We've been looking recently at partnering with print media organizations like the Los Angeles Business Journal, who have tons of readers and subscribers, who have an amazing audience of people, and who can use Zenvoy to find ways to connect their readers. Those are some of the organizations who are not networking organizations, which makes them into high value, business development networks. We've also found that we are doing a great job at peer to peer matching for private organizations. We are also finding it's an amazing marketing opportunity for those organizations, who are finding out what their members live and die by, what connections they are trying to create. Those organizations sometimes also live and die by sponsor dollars, and there are lots of sponsorship and branding opportunities. We are also white labeling the software, and letting them show their own advertisements. Those organizations find that not only is there networking going on, but a whole new avenue for them to expose their brand, for sponsorships, and that goes back to the traditional print media, where they recognize this as a new digital play for them, and a new way to leverage their community of people. It also gives them a way to capture a whole new audience. They're very excited.

Thanks!

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