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COMPANY PURCHASE BACKGROUNDER
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How The Well Bought Itself

Legendary, Pioneering Online Community Found a Way to Go Independent

The WELL, a legendary pioneering online community, learned on Fri, 29 Jun 2012 that Salon Media Group, Inc., its corporate owner for the last 13 years, had put the domain name and the community itself up for sale, separately or together.

WELL members responded with shock, then rallied, unwilling to see their community fall into hands that might not support the WELL's legendary atmosphere of long-form, quirky, and high-voltage discussion and debate.

The membership quickly mounted an online pledge drive, offering amounts that ranged from US$1 to US$10,000 to back any acquisition effort. The show of support inspired a smaller team of members - including Internet pioneers, a healthcare futurist, entrepreneurs, and a professional clown teacher - to pool larger investments, form an investment group, incorporate, and negotiate with Salon's management.

"We appreciate that Salon stepped in to host this wide-ranging, sometimes unruly conversation for so many years," said Earl Crabb, CEO of The Well Group, Inc. "But we're also glad to be making our own way now."

A Prodigious Beginning

Launched in 1985 by "Whole Earth Catalog" founder Stewart Brand and entrepreneur/philanthropist Larry Brilliant, The WELL was an early electronic Bulletin Board Service (BBS), and became one of the first dial-up Internet Service Providers (ISPs). This combination attracted an active membership, many of whom were well known in the worlds of technology, music, and publishing. While never numbering more than thousands of members, the passion and influence of the base ensured that the service would have a larger cultural impact throughout its 27-year history.

In 2003, Time magazine called The WELL "a huge hit, a precursor of every online business from Amazon.com to eBay." From status posts on Facebook, the now ubiquitous user-comments sections on websites, expert Q & A forums, and blogs, to the user-mediated Craigslist, people were doing it first inside the WELL.

Born long before there was a public Internet or a World Wide Web, The WELL made up its own rules as it went along - and still does. Among the strikingly different characteristics of The WELL is a concept introduced by Brand: You Own Your Own Words (YOYOW). WELL members are not allowed to be anonymous and must take full personal responsibility for all messages they post to the service and, reciprocally, no one else may use their words without their specific permission.

Spanning The Globe, Spanning Time

Individual discussions on the WELL sometimes go on for years. With durable context by design, engaged hosts, and a core of longtime member-participants, newcomers often cite The WELL as a refreshing oasis of real "online community" and substantive conversation, in stark contrast to the famously "short attention span" Internet. Conversations on the WELL take place in both public and private conferences, with topics ranging from the political to the very personal. Long-time members have shared births, deaths, triumphs and defeats. At its best, The WELL has been a raucous workshop for vigorous free expression that rewards original thought and eventual mutual respect.

"Our entire reason for being is conversation," said Celia Chapman, a veteran of The WELL. "While some sites are organized around the people making comments, the WELL is organized around the topics themselves. You can read easily, at any time, everything that's been said about Arduinos, writing a screenplay, ethical dilemmas, the best places to hike or tiny hole in the wall restaurants all in Ireland, the latest discoveries in biology or physics - all in one place. Ask how to fix a broken oven or take public transportation in Korea, and someone will tell you, often more quickly than searching the web for an answer."

Members of The WELL include musicians, futurists, writers of every kind, computer pioneers, martial arts experts, statisticians, entrepreneurs, and cooks.

"It's really different," said member Evelyn Pine. "You get novices and experts talking together. People know each other across different conversations and over time, often in person as well as online."

Why did The WELL's members gang up so quickly to make sure it continues?

"The WELL is irresistible for a certain type of person," said entrepreneur Jim Rutt. "For people who love to connect with a wide range of other people, even and maybe especially ones they disagree with; for people who are hungry for the unexpected and the enlightening; for people who love words and their interplay. For me, it would be very difficult to replace the knowledge, wit, discussion, fun, and friends I've found on the WELL."

The membership pledge drive itself empowered the group of 11 long-time members to incorporate, on July 16, 2012, as The Well Group, Inc. and bring a viable offer to the Salon Media Group for purchase of The WELL. Each member of The Well Group, Inc. brings an average tenure on the WELL in excess of 20 years.

Sustainable Business Model

The WELL represents an almost unheard-of phenomenon, a pay site that has been self-sustaining for more than twenty-five years. The membership pricing provides a simple, understandable model, and removes any conflicting interests of corporate sponsors, advertising, product placement or data mining. The primary interest of the company remains the membership.

There are two levels of membership:

- "Essential" (US$10/month) provides basic conferencing via a web browser.
- "Complete" (US$15/month) provides access to conferences, a well.com email address, conference creation, your own external www.well.com web pages, and SSH access for command-line tools.

"In return for $15 a month," says Crabb, "there's no advertising, and a community agreement that your words in the WELL stay private. We don't sell or use your information in any way. Everyone has an equal ability to start or participate in a discussion."

According to Crabb, "The WELL's been around too long to be the next new thing, but one of its members just might be inventing it right now."

Additional reading

Books:
Howard Rheingold's The Virtual Community
John Seabrook's Deeper
Katie Hafner's The WELL

Articles:
You own your own 20th anniversary
Wendy M. Grossman, The Inquirer, April 8, 2005.

A Sense of Well Being
Six authors tell of their differing WELL experiences.
Salon.com, March 31, 2000.

The Epic Saga of The Well
Katie Hafner, cover story, WIRED Magazine, May 1997.

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