

HOME

JOB MARKET

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AUTOMOBILES

NEWS

- International
- National
- Washington
- Business
- Technology
- Science
- Health
- Sports
- New York Region
- The City
- Columns
- Education
- Weather
- Obituaries
- NYT Front Page
- Corrections

OPINION

- Editorials/Op-Ed
- Readers' Opinions

FEATURES

- Arts
- Books
- Movies
- Travel
- Dining & Wine
- Home & Garden
- Fashion & Style
- New York Today
- Crossword/Games
- Cartoons
- Magazine
- Week in Review
- Multimedia/Photos
- College
- Learning Network

SERVICES

- Archive
- Classifieds
- Book a Trip
- Personals
- Theater Tickets
- NYT Store **NEW**
- NYT Mobile
- E-Cards & More
- About NYTDigital
- Jobs at NYTDigital
- Online Media Kit
- Our Advertisers

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- Your Profile
- E-Mail Preferences
- News Tracker
- Premium Account
- Site Help
- Privacy Policy

NEWSPAPER

- Home Delivery
- Customer Service
- Electronic Edition
- Media Kit
- Community Affairs

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PUBLIC LIVES

Entrepreneur Takes Black-Oriented Site Out of Red

By LYNDA RICHARDSON

A FRIEND recently marveled to Omar Wasow, executive director of BlackPlanet .com, that it is amazing to visit a dot-com where people still have jobs. You are struck by this, too, as Mr. Wasow, who is lanky with dreadlocks draped in a long ponytail, gives a tour of the youthful Flatiron District offices on a late afternoon.

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Mr. Wasow, 31, is explaining why BlackPlanet.com is, by far, the most heavily trafficked African-American Web destination, with 1.5 million different visitors in any given month, according to the Nielsen /NetRatings service.

He is studied and polite, not the sort to sling a raspberry at industry skeptics who more than a year ago dismissed BlackPlanet as too racially specific and doomed to fail.

"People didn't believe there was a business to be had serving African-Americans online," he says. "And to the extent that business was there, they were convinced `Why would a start-up succeed when you've got all these big media companies doing the same thing?'"

BlackPlanet, which is privately held and began in September 1999, just recorded its first quarterly profit, Mr. Wasow says, though he won't reveal how much. "If we ate a couple of sandwiches, we would have been in the red," he says. "It's not a major milestone, but for an Internet company, it's a big deal."

So what accounts for BlackPlanet's popularity?

"What we've done is taken the grapevine in the black community and extended it to the



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times
"What we've done is taken the grapevine in the black community and extended it to the Internet." — OMAR WASOW

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Internet," he says, loping down the spiral staircase that joins the two floors of Community Connect Inc. of New York, which builds Web sites intended for minority groups, including Black Planet.com. AsianAvenue.com and MiGente.com are there, too.

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Mr. Wasow, a Stanford graduate, is wearing a hand-tailored blue suit and an apricot-colored shirt. He has model good looks. He was named the sexiest Internet executive by People magazine in 2000. He is Oprah Winfrey's on-air technology expert and the Internet analyst for WNBC-TV, a job he held at cable television's MSNBC for five years.

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He's clearly at ease as he sits at a conference table in a quiet corner. He says his own office is no man's land, a temporary storage closet for the 85-employee Community Connect, where he is also a senior manager.

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He enthusiastically points out the features of BlackPlanet.com: the message boards, chat rooms, personal Web pages and, more recently, a chance to find romance and jobs. The home page constantly tells visitors how many have logged on to the site.

"The essence of it is the social aspect," he says. "What it means is that this site is alive. There's hustle and bustle. There are living and breathing people at the site. Most of the other sites feel like being alone in the library. We've built ourselves from the ground up to be much more like a cafe than a library. We focus on the conversation."

REAL ESTATE

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Mr. Wasow is known as a digital-age intellectual, also hip and unconventional. A founder of a charter elementary school in Bedford-Stuyvesant set to open next fall, he jokes that the independent public school is penitence for being a capitalist in a family of educators.

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His voice grows serious, though, when he talks about how basic literacy must precede computer literacy. "The real way to help poor kids succeed in the information economy is to teach them to process information in their own heads effectively, not use word processors and spreadsheets," he says.

Mr. Wasow's background is middle-class and biracial. His father, an economics professor, is Jewish, and his mother, an early-childhood educator, is African-American. He grew up mostly in Greenwich Village, and went online at age 12.

He had tried a similar Web site in 1993, financed through credit cards and savings and operated from the living room of his Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, apartment. He says too few black Internet users existed then to support it. But in the last five years, he says, blacks have embraced the Internet at a faster rate than whites.

"There are some folks who don't appreciate why a black online community would be valuable," he says. "Some of these people understand the idea of a Jewish community or a Christian community but the idea of a racially defined community is somehow inconsistent with the values of integration, that somehow race shouldn't matter."

"But the reality is that, whether you're talking about the practical ways race affects people's lives, from trying to get a mortgage or buying a car, to the social aspect, people want to hang out with people who have had shared experiences."

At times, Mr. Wasow folds his arms tightly as he ponders a thought. When the conversation ends, he wonders whether he sounds too serious. He wants you to know he can be fun, even silly. He wore a red velvet suit to the party introducing the Web site, looking like a cross between Santa Claus and James Brown.

He still sees himself as a bit of a nerd. He says his girlfriend of a year, a computer programmer, is fairly nerdy, too. (She'll love that.)

As if to prove his nerd cred, he swings over to a computer to call up the "Archie McPhee Nerd Test." He got a 98 percent rating, because, among other things, he has his own Web site and domain name, checks his e-mail before brushing his teeth, wears a digital watch. He's been to parties where most of the guests were math Ph.D.'s. (His grandfather, whose adoptive Bulgarian name was Wasow, was a math Ph.D.)

So do we have him pegged? Not exactly. "There's nothing mutually exclusive about being a gadget freak, a policy wonk and a clothes horse. For me, it's perfectly typical."

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