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BRIGHT IDEAS

BlackPlanet's Universe

The website is a place to find jobs, political debates, even dates. Oh, and it makes money.

BY CATE T. CORCORAN



OPENING DOORS: Wasow says the site introduces many African-Americans to the web.

Chris Callis

THE PING-PONG TABLE in the dot-com's breakroom is kind of disconcerting. So is the building, a converted loft with sweeping sixth-floor views of the Hudson River and the West Village. Uh, this is 2004, right? Not 1999?

Welcome to the offices of [BlackPlanet.com](#), a community website for African-Americans that has confounded expectations by not only staying in business, but turning a profit. "We put a human face on the web for the black community," says executive director Omar Wasow, '92.

BlackPlanet has the highest traffic of any black-oriented site on the web, and it is the largest of a trio of ethnic community sites run by Community Connect of New York City. (The others are [AsianAvenue.com](#) and [MiGente.com](#).) BlackPlanet started as a place to post personal web pages, then added matchmaking and, more recently, job postings. It also includes news of interest to the African-American community, opinion

polls and discussions about political and social issues.

BlackPlanet has high visibility and recognition among African-Americans. "If I were to ask five black people my age if they'd heard of BlackPlanet, two of them would be on it, and at least three out of the five would know about it," says Qabbani Goodwyn, a 30-year-old lending consultant from Windsor Mill, Md., who met his wife on the site.

At one level, BlackPlanet functions as a watercooler. Police brutality, racial profiling and the untimely death of R&B singer Aaliyah have been hot topics. A recent message-board post asking, "Who will step up to be our next black leader in the new century?" garnered more than 3,000 responses.

It's the matchmaking section of the site, though, that gets the most love. Thousands of couples are dating offline at any given time. Several dozen have gotten hitched. "Where else is a 50-year-old black woman going to meet her husband?" asks Wasow. "Being able to date from a pool of people who share your experiences is much more likely to produce success."

BlackPlanet's broader mission is to strengthen the black community, Wasow says. "One reason the digital divide is smaller is that we've helped motivate African-Americans to become heavy users of the Internet." BlackPlanet has about 10

million members, many of whom have learned HTML, the lingua franca of the web.

Indeed, the percentage of African-Americans online is growing, from 35 percent in 1999 to 42 percent in 2003. And BlackPlanet has the highest percentage of African-American visitors of any site on the Internet, according to Nielsen//NetRatings.

But BlackPlanet didn't always look like a sure thing. When the site launched in 1999, it was a relative latecomer. Three similar sites aimed at African-Americans already existed, and they were backed by big media companies, including AOL. "Everybody assumed we were going to get crushed," says Wasow.

Wasow attributes BlackPlanet's success to the company's underlying technology—homegrown software that lets users move seamlessly between personal pages, dating, chat and message boards—and its focus on connecting people to one another rather than feeding them content.

Membership on BlackPlanet is free, although some elect to pay \$19.95 a month to see detailed dating profiles and find out who has sent them "crushes." Community Connect makes most of its money from advertisers, and also charges corporations to view résumés from its diverse membership.

BlackPlanet was born out of a fortuitous meeting between Wasow and Community Connect's president and CEO, Benjamin Sun. At the time, Wasow was running New York Online, an Internet service provider and pre-web community he had started in his Brooklyn living room in 1993. New York Online had a multicultural focus, but it had only about 1,000 users and was steamrolled by the emerging web. The company survived by building websites for magazines such as *Vibe*, *Essence* and *Latino*. It was at a meeting for one of those clients that Sun and Wasow met.

"I was blown away by what they were doing with AsianAvenue," Wasow says. "It made sense to come on board" to launch BlackPlanet.

The son of civil rights activists, Wasow grew up in Greenwich Village. His father, who is Jewish, is an economics professor, and his mother, who is African-American, is an early childhood educator. Wasow has always been interested in the intersection between entrepreneurship and activism. His first job after college was as assistant director for a nonprofit that taught legal forms of entrepreneurship to ex-drug dealers. Now he's a co-founder and president of the board of a charter school for poor children in Brooklyn. In his spare time, he serves as a technology correspondent for NBC and deejays once a month in a Brooklyn bar called Moe's.

Wasow says he occasionally gets questions about whether BlackPlanet is fostering racial separatism. "Voluntarily socializing with people who share your interests is what freedom is all about," he says. "Anybody can join any of the sites. We found we were not segregating the web. Members would come and hang out at BlackPlanet, then become more enthusiastic citizens of the web in general."

Community Connect has 100 employees and has received a total of \$22 million of venture capital, including a post-crash round of \$2 million in 2002. There are no plans for an IPO or acquisition anytime soon, Wasow says. "We're still relatively small and have to prove our worth a little longer." But, he adds, "by 1999 standards, we're a blue-chip company."

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