



Hansan Holds E-Advocacy Advantage

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In 1986, Robert Hansan was about to graduate from college, his girlfriend was pregnant and he didn't have a job. But he did have an idea. Encouraged by a brother who worked for a printer, he decided to publish a directory of members of Congress and sell it to trade associations as a kind of party favor.

Today, Hansan's Fairfax company, Capitol Advantage LLC, all but owns the lucrative market in congressional directories and that's the least of his renown. In the late 1990s, he transformed that prosaic business into a rudiment of Internet lobbying, which is now the fastest growing and arguably the most potent form of persuasion in the nation's capital.

"Bob was a pioneer," said Sheeraz Haji, chief executive of GetActive Software Inc., of Berkeley, Calif., a Capitol Advantage competitor in cyber-advocacy. "He's shaped the market where we are today."

Hansan's influence is ubiquitous -- and anonymous. If you've ever e-mailed your representatives or learned about them online, chances are that you did so through Capitol Advantage without knowing it. Here's how it works:

Go to a variety of Web sites such as America Online, Yahoo, MSN, the New York Times or USA Today -- or to the sites of 1,300 lobbying groups (including AARP, the American Bankers Association and the League of Conservation Voters). Search for information on Congress, politics or Washington advocacy. Then type in your Zip code and out will spew a wealth of information about your legislators and an easy way to contact them.

Last year, those few keystrokes led to 18 million e-mails to lawmakers and other officials. This year, the number will be even higher. And unless you look at each site's fine print, you'd never realize that Hansan's company powered them all.

Capitol Advantage wasn't the first company to use a Zip code system (though it popularized it). It isn't the only firm that facilitates e-mailing to Congress (though it is, by far, the largest.) Yet its program's simplicity, accuracy and low cost have made it a foundation of cyber-democracy -- and made Hansan a rich man.

No one could have imagined any of that at the beginning. "I didn't start this company because I had a grand idea," Hansan said from his spacious office. "I started the company because I needed to support a family."

In four months, at age 21, Hansan had a son, got married, graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University and started a company. He moved into his parents' home in McLean, borrowed \$10,000 from his father Jack (a longtime Ohio politico) and trudged from one corporate office to another trying to sell a publication that didn't exist anywhere but in his dreams.

Hansan turned out to be both lucky and skilled. The two firms that were producing directories at the time were mediocre, and the corporations and associations that bought the books were eager for an alternative supplier. Hansan was a tireless salesman even though all he had to show potential clients was a prototype with blank pages. After numerous rejections, ARCO, Northrop, and the Society of Professional Benefit Administrators gave him his first orders.

Two exhausting years later, Capitol Advantage's sales were brisk enough for Hansan and his young family to move out of his parents' house and for him to hire his first full-time employee: Sherry Stanley, his college roommate's girlfriend. By 1993, revenue topped \$1 million and the next year he bought out one of his rivals. Capitol Advantage now publishes up to 500,000 books a year in five versions, and Stanley is senior vice president for sales and marketing. Jack Hansan now works for his son.

But the directories were only the first chapter in the Capitol Advantage saga. In 1996, Hansan was confronted by the Internet boom. He understood that his business might soon become obsolete unless he acted. But how? He struggled for months to figure a way to transfer his directories to Web sites and still make a buck.

Finally, his oldest brother, John, offered the insight he needed. "Just build a directory online," he said, "and charge for its use."

That's pretty much what Hansan had been doing for years with his paper directories. He wrote and printed a basic book and then customized its cover with the names and logos of the organizations that purchased it. The organizations would then hand them out as gifts as if they were their own.

Hansan decided to do the same online. He converted his congressional information into an Internet-ready package and, for a fee, dressed it up to look like it belonged to the company or association on whose Web site it appeared. The more groups that used the service, the more money his company made. By adding data down to the local level, Capitol Advantage quickly became the industry standard for politics.

C-Span was its first Web client and hundreds of other groups soon followed. When the e-mail wave hit, Hansan rode its crest by adding the Zip code function. His lowly directories, once

threatened with extinction by the Web, instead became the hottest tool in online advocacy thanks to a burst of innovation and clever early planning.

Lawmakers weren't always thrilled by the extra attention that Hansan's products brought. He had already angered them by publishing their office fax numbers in his print directories. The resulting deluge of faxes almost overwhelmed them. The flood of e-mails that followed his foray into the Internet wreaked similar havoc.

But Hansan was unrepentant. He believed that he had a responsibility to empower people to contact their government officials. "We are very committed to making sure that people have an opportunity to have their say," he said. In 1999, he started a cutting-edge Internet lobbying shop called e-Advocates to explore new ways to apply political pressure. His partner in that venture is a former client, Pam Fielding, who once headed the online advocacy program of the National Education Association.

These days most of Capitol Advantage's more than \$10 million in annual revenue and 70 person staff come from the electronic side of the business. And Hansan, though only 40 years old (and still married), is considered a grizzled veteran of the Web. "In this space, I'm like a grandfather," he said. "Most people don't know I'm still very young."

And he says he isn't through breaking new ground. He also makes time for a hobby: owning racehorses. He hopes that someday, one of them will win the Kentucky Derby. If it does, it won't be hard to spot. Hansan's silks are black and gold, the colors of his alma mater.