

Eastside Technology

MIT forums offer opportunities, information to entrepreneurs

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In this era of explosive technological change, the MIT Enterprise Forum of the Northwest has developed into one of the region's most important gathering places for entrepreneurs seeking to build the new economy on a solid foundation. The Enterprise Forum provides today's fast-moving start-ups and emerging growth companies with a chance to learn from the experiences of their peers and competitors, gain feedback and insight from leading industry experts, and establish relationships with potential business partners.

Pursuing entrepreneurial success can sometimes be an isolating experience, all about focus and passion and specialized technology. But to truly succeed, small companies must know what others are doing. They must be able to forge strategic alliances in order to remain competitive. They also must be able to understand the marketing, financing, legal, human resources and other issues that can make the difference between success and failure.

The MIT Enterprise Forum provides just such an opportunity to the area's technology community. True to its name, the organization offers a valuable "forum" for its high-tech constituency. Approximately eight times a year, hundreds of entrepreneurs, technology workers, executives, investors, service providers and others come together for an evening devoted to socializing, networking, exchanging ideas and learning.

On Sept. 15 the Enterprise Forum will kick off its 1999-2000 season with an already sold-out event titled "From eCommerce to eBusiness - How To Succeed In The Brave New World." This season-opening presentation, beginning at 5:30 p.m. at the Bellevue Hyatt Regency, will be moderated by Vern Keenan of Keenan Vision Inc., and will feature David Rome, VP of Marketing at Ariba Inc.; Anne Perlman, CEO of Moai Technologies Inc.; Glenn Ballman, CEO of Onvia.com Inc. and Blair LaCorte, Sr. VP of Strategy and E-Commerce at VerticalNet Inc.

This panel of prominent experts will swap war stories and discuss some of the potential pitfalls that face online business pioneers. Among other subjects, they will explore new business models that have arisen in the electronic world, successful branding and marketing strategies, and opportunities created by technological developments and convergence. As is always the case with MIT Enterprise Forum events, members of the audience will be encouraged to ask questions and share their own experiences. All in all, this forum should be of value to anyone who recognizes (or should recognize!) that Internet business success is not as easy as slapping up a Web site and waiting for the investors and customers to arrive.

Future topics this season promise to be similarly entertaining and informative. Upcoming subjects include: "Growing Up is Hard to Do!" - the transition from an entrepreneurial to a "scalable" company (Oct. 20); the Forum's annual telecom event (Dec. 8); "Buy vs. Build" - the use of outsourcing as a tool to grow the business (Jan. 19, 2000); the Internet as a means of distribution (Feb. 16, 2000); early stage financing issues, including the pros and cons of venture capitalists and "angels" (March 15, 2000) and late-stage financing issues, including "Dutch auctions" and Internet IPOs (May 17, 2000).

While the topics are undoubtedly timely, the most significant aspect of the MIT Enterprise Forum may be the openness of its culture. Presenting companies frequently come ready to stand up on stage and bare their corporate souls, allowing the audience to learn from their false steps and missed opportunities, and giving themselves an opportunity to gain sometimes invaluable feedback from other panelists and attendees. Similarly, members of the audience come ready to meet others, share experiences, debate issues and eat food that really is pretty good.

The MIT Enterprise Forum of the Northwest is a volunteer, non-profit organization that is affiliated with the Alumni Association of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Its events are open to anyone interested in growing or enhancing a business.

All events are held at the Bellevue Hyatt Regency, 900 Bellevue Way N.E. They include registration and socializing beginning at 5:30 p.m., dinner and the main event at 6:15 and wind up at about 8:30. Tickets, including dinner and parking, are \$35 per person (\$45 for the season opener), with a \$10 surcharge for tickets reserved after the Friday before the event, space permitting. Reservations and prepayment are required. To register for events, go to the Forum's Web site at <http://www.mitwa.org/> or call (206) 283-9595. Early registration is recommended.

Paul F. Norris is a partner at the law firm Anderson Norris Steiner de Regt LLP, and is the chair of the publicity committee for the MIT Enterprise Forum of the Northwest.