

THE CYBER ENTREPRENEUR



MELISSA MCCANTS '96

Every Saturday, the McCants family sits down to lunch together. While passing the salt and pepper, they also swap business ideas – Norman Rockwell's version of a power lunch. But don't be fooled by the family atmosphere. They debate in detail the problems of overhead, liability, hidden costs, staffing and a myriad of other dilemmas facing a potential business venture.

In one of these heated bull sessions, Melissa McCants '96 heard an idea that piqued her entrepreneurial curiosity. Her uncle's house had been struck by lightning, and he had spent an entire day driving around town looking for the best deals on a replacement television set. What if he could look online and find the best deal rather than waste all that time in traffic, McCants wondered.

And out of this hypothetical question came Here's the Deal, LLC., an online business established by McCants and her uncle that gathers discounts, specials and various items for sale from around the Tri-County area. "Online users print out a variety of coupons," she explains. "On our site, we have deals for a wide range of local businesses – the College of Charleston Bookstore, restaurants, hotels, salons, various sporting events, and of course, an appliance and television shop."

More chic than geek, McCants never really thought that she would be operating a Web-based business. But the communication major has become a quick study of the Internet and online shopping. "Over the last year, I have learned quite a bit about computers," she says. "We have worked hard to design a Web page that is easy to use and logical. I am also very aware of the type of traffic our site generates, which is crucial when attracting new businesses to list with us. I believe that any business, either located on the street corner or in cyberspace, can be successful if correctly marketed."

Fortunately, McCants knows marketing. After graduation, she worked closely under the direction of Charleston Riverdogs owner Michael Veeck, observing and absorbing his offbeat approach to promotions. In 1998, McCants returned to her alma mater as the director of marketing for the athletics department. For the next six years, she was able to fine-tune her marketing skills as well as create a wonderful network of contacts within the region.

But even the best business plans need a little luck. That good fortune materialized when she met with a local radio station. McCants was exploring

the possibility of a "trade of services" to increase the Web site's exposure. What she walked away with was an unexpected partnership with Apex Broadcasting. The radio group's management team had considered a similar notion, but had not yet pursued such an extensive project. McCants' Web site gives Apex's sales team another outlet for attracting businesses, and McCants benefits from a sales force pushing her services gratis.

McCants also see this arrangement as having great possibilities. No small dreamer, McCants envisions www.HeresTheDeal.info to have a national reach eventually, in which an online user could click on any given state, choose a city and find discounts on the local level. She would like to establish relationships like the one she has with Apex Broadcasting with other local radio and television stations across the country. With this model in mind, she has started franchises in Columbia, S.C. and Augusta, Ga.

As for owning a business, McCants finds it exhilarating. "Before, I wasn't a morning person; now, I can't wait to get to the office to work," McCants reveals. "In my other jobs, you knew what to expect for the most part from season to season, year to year, but there is no routine to what I am doing now. It is very exciting not knowing what is going to happen today or tomorrow, but to know only that whatever work you put into it, is your own."

–Mark Berry