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San Rafael digital newsletter startup hopes to boost community engagement

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After more than a decade of collaborating on various startups, Paul Remer and Johan Wikman have teamed up with their two sons to launch Kontribune, a digital newsletter company. Based in an in-law unit behind Wikman's San Rafael home, Kontribune helps organizations that previously relied on traditional paper newsletters go digital with a highly interactive but user-friendly template that connects to social media. It also aims to promote community journalism.

"This notion of a monthly, quarterly newsletter we believe is a thing of the past," said Wikman, 48.

"What we're really wanting is to engage the community and give everyone an equal voice," added Remer, 54. "We have a much bigger vision about building tools for community."

Remer, Wikman and Wikman's 24-year-old son, Collin Wikman, are all co-founders of the company. Remer's 26-year-old son, Eric Remer, is Kontribune's first employee.

Remer and Wikman previously worked together at wireless carrier software firm Siterra, which Remer co-founded. The company employed about 75 people at its peak and was originally based in Novato before moving to San Francisco several years ago.

The pair also co-founded Keibi Technologies, which developed moderation tools for online comments and other user-generated content.

Since the first Kontribune site launched this fall, the company has set up sites for between 20 and 25 other organizations. Roughly 75 percent of its clients are nonprofit groups and most are based in the Bay Area, Remer and Wikman said.

Customers so far include the Agricultural Institute of Marin, the Canal Alliance and the YMCA of San Francisco, which plans to use its page to engage with employees, Remer said.

All sites run on the same template so far, but controls for privacy and many other features are customizable. For example, site managers can allow anyone to upload stories, specify who may contribute or opt to make the site completely private. Some extended families are using the private option to share updates, photographs and videos in a closed, interactive environment, Remer and Wikman said.

Site managers also have the option of running advertisements and linking their Kontribune site to social media accounts. Monthly charges for a Kontribune site start at around \$30, although the rates for families with closed sites are much lower, Remer said.

"The idea is that it's so configurable that it really fits everybody," said Wikman, a former engineering manager at San Francisco-based game company Zynga.

"It's designed to be self-service," Remer added. "There's no programming or HTML required."

Erik Hernandez, a youth education advocate at the Canal Alliance, said he has been using Kontribune to publish a student newspaper with about 10 eighth-, ninth- and tenth-graders.

So far the site is invitation-only as students get up to speed on writing stories, but Hernandez said he hopes to open it up to a larger audience by next summer.

"What I liked about (Kontribune) is it's very easy to use < it's almost like having your own Facebook profile but then you upload stories, and it's almost like SFGate or Marin IJ," Hernandez said. "It's very accessible because you can do all the controls. ... For me it's like, 'Wow, you can just upload the pictures and if you want to put a video in, you just put the link to YouTube.'"

The Agricultural Institute of Marin has been experimenting with its Kontribune site for a couple of months and eventually hopes to get farmers and customers to contribute stories, said Emmett Brady, a farmers market manager for the institute.

"We've been using it more like a living newsletter," Brady said. "It's sort of like the next step in newsletters and it doesn't remain static and it's not like you're creating news just for a newsletter. With this we can ... update it on a need-to basis."

Meanwhile, Mill Valley resident and Tweetup organizer Sally Kuhlman said she has been using Kontribune for her Sally Around the Bay site and likes "the community building aspect, which allowed me to give others permission to add content, freeing up my time" as well as "the potential for future ad revenue.

"(It's) very easy to include ads on the side," Kuhlman said in an email. "(A) selling point to advertisers is the targeted audience, for example most of my Kontribune readers are local Marinites."

The co-founders have been self-funding the startup thus far but will consider potential angel investment early next year, Remer said. They hope to be profitable by the end of 2012.

To learn more about Kontribune, go to <http://www.kontribune.com/>.

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