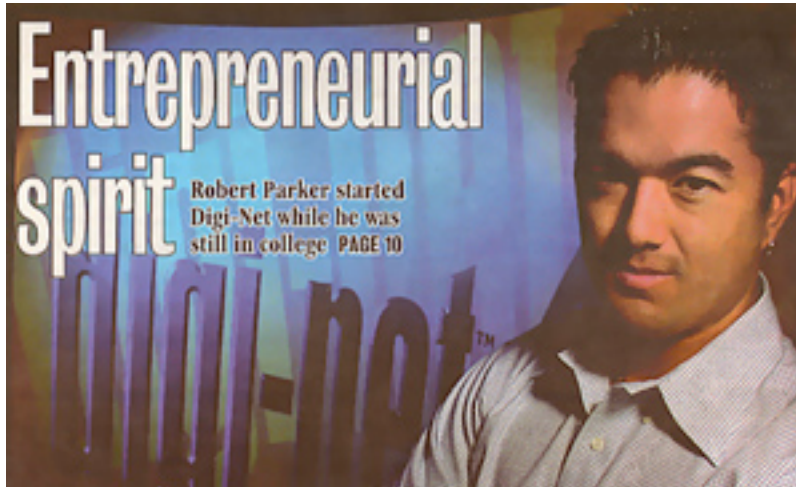


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By JOE COOMBS
Gainesville Sun business writer
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A Pure Entrepreneur



The entrepreneurial spirit has always had a hold on Robert Parker. When he was a youth, he started his own lawn care business and had relatives and friends on his payroll.

And as a junior in college in the mid 1990s, he built the foundation for what has become one of the state's fastest-growing tech companies, Digi-Net Technologies Inc. At the time, the World Wide Web hadn't exactly caught on with the general public, but Parker - who was an English major and had a job with a graphic design firm - had other ideas.

"I remember seeing Mosaic software, which was a precursor to Netscape, and I was floored by the technology," said Parker, 28. "I had some money that I earned from the graphic design job, so I started the business in 1996. It felt natural."

Early on, Digi-Net provided Internet access for local companies, and also consulted firms outside of Gainesville on getting connected to the Web. Digi-Net built a solid client base, but Parker didn't like the growth potential.

"The problem with our business model was, we took a client on, performed consulting and they paid us," he said. "That doesn't scale well for future growth, because it's a one-time transaction. I wanted to develop something and sell it a million times, and that's why we started getting into software."

In November 1998, Digi-Net launched its first signature product, DigiChat. It allowed Internet users to participate in a chat room on a particular Web site, and DigiChat clients included professional sports teams, Internet service providers and fan club Web sites for actor Michael Douglas and pop group Backstreet Boys.

Other current users of DigiChat include BellSouth, Harvard University and IBM. Focusing on software became "a turning point" for Digi-Net, Parker said.

"Once we got our feet wet with that, the company was doubling in size every year," he said. "AOL grew rapidly because of its 'chat capabilities,' and we were able to leverage that phenomenon. It really fueled a lot of our growth."

Next up was Groopz, a software product geared toward "e-businesses," or companies that conduct online sales. It allows businesses to "see" every customer that's scanning their Web site, and offer personalized service.

After a pop-up greeting on the screen, users are offered help with finding what they're looking for on the site.

"I like to call it the digital handshake," Parker said. "It's just like a person behind a counter in a shop who sees all their customers coming through, or a car salesman who sees someone walking around the lot and tries to find out what type of car they're interested in. This happens in the real world every day, and we're doing the exact same thing on a Web site."



ROBERT PARKER
Chief Executive Officer/President, Digi-Net Technologies Inc.

- **PERSONAL:** single
- **CAR HE DRIVES:** Ford Bronco
- **LAST BOOK READ:** "The Art of Happiness," by the Dalai Lama
- **LAST MOVIE SEEN:** "We Were Soldiers"
- **BEST ADVICE RECEIVED:** "In life, relationships are like cookie jars. Every time you take a cookie, make sure you give one back. If you look at most failed relationships, you'll find one jar full of cookies and one jar empty," from Lee Corso, college football analyst.
- **HIS GUIDING LIGHT:** Always make a customer happy, and do as much possible research on that customer's problems to meet their needs.

Digi-Net is a privately-held company that doesn't release sales figures, but Parker said that revenues have grown more than 600 percent in the past three years. The company will either lease its software to clients, who pay a monthly fee for service, usage and upgrades, or sell it outright to larger corporations who have the support staff to handle its operations.

Digi-Net's fast growth is also getting some attention from its counterparts in the local technology sector.

"Robert is one of the purest entrepreneurs in Gainesville," said Todd Chase, director of operations at Cenetec, a tech-consulting firm. "The company has been a real sleeper around here until now. I'd say some of its competitors, many of which are high-flying Internet companies that have raised millions of dollars in capital, still don't have the quality kind of company that Robert has put together."

Located on NW 57th Street in Gainesville, Digi-Net has a staff of 30, including administrative workers, software programmers and sales and marketing representatives. Later this year, Digi-Net will add an office in Atlanta for additional sales and marketing staff, and will also hire sales reps in Tampa and Miami that will help launch upgraded versions of the company's software products.

Even though the business is still small by industry standards, Parker said he'd eventually like to turn Digi-Net into "America's next great tech company."

"When I got started, I was probably working 18- or 19-hour days," Parker said. "Now, I've cut back to about 50 or 60 hours a week, and that's a function of the staff we have here. Everyone here knows how to get the job done. We haven't lost our drive or hunger, and as long as we've got that, I'll have a good time."

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