

In the News



CEO Interview with Robert Parker By Andy Cohen

Robert Parker is CEO and founder of Digi-Net Technologies, Inc. Digi-Net is a premier provider of Internet Communication Solutions to eBusinesses of all sizes. To date, more than 14,000 web clients benefit from the eCRM, community-building and instant messaging solutions provided by Digi-Net. From their award-winning DigiChat real-time chat software to the patent-pending Groopz E-Commerce Proactive web sales and customer service application, Digi-Net prides itself on breaking down the barriers of traditional Internet communication to enable the web to mimic real-world settings. Digi-Net has an extensive client base including Procter & Gamble, Interscope Records, Intel, Boeing, Verio, US West, Sun Microsystems, Harvard University, Lucent Technologies, BellSouth and more, along with leading elite commerce partners such as internet.com.

Founded in 1996, Digi-Net started as a web-based systems integration firm that served Fortune 1000 companies as their strategic advisor, assisting them with custom software development and infrastructure as well as e-marketing and integration issues. Digi-Net Founder and CEO, Robert Parker, attended the University of Florida after which he rented office space and started his grassroots Web Company, Digi-Net Technologies. The idea was conceived because Parker wanted to connect people to online businesses in the exact same way they can connect in real-world settings.

Digi-Net experienced immediate and rapid growth with the introduction of DigiChat, a Java-based chat solution that can be found on web sites around the world. DigiChat built an unparalleled client base and positioned Digi-Net as an Industry leader. Digi-Net completed the transition into today's role as a software technology provider in early 1998. After two years of establishing stability and credibility in the Internet market, Digi-Net decided to make its next move into a new, untapped, Internet niche: online sales and customer care. Through personal experience and statistics, Parker found a trend in abandoned online shopping carts and dissatisfied customers. Digi-Net decided to create a solution that provided web merchants with a complete set of tools to "see" and proactively engage in a chat dialogue with their online visitors to assist the online sales process. In July 2000, Groopz E-Commerce was released. Groopz is the first solution that takes eCRM to the next level by not only enabling merchants to assist current online customers, but to help them attract and retain new customers without boundaries by proactive contact ability. Groopz was declared a success. Groopz has been awarded two perfect five star ratings from leading eBusiness software distributors ZDNet and Tucows for product excellence, and hundreds of clients attribute their online sales increases up of to 70% to the Groopz software.

For the year 2001, Digi-Net has created Hubz, the Internet's first-ever Instant Messaging tool that allows every visitor on a site to see and interact with each other — regardless of buddy lists or applications in use. Hubz is taking online communities to the next level by providing the Web customer with the ability to instantly "see" who is viewing the same Web page as them and chat with them, one on one, if they wish to do so.

Digi-Net Technologies, Inc. is a privately held corporation, headquartered in Gainesville, FL. In the past five years, Digi-Net has more than tripled its original employee base and continues to return a positive revenue margin consistently above the average of competitors.

Recently Robert Parker sat down with Andy Cohen publisher of NetCommerce magazine and discussed Digi-Net Technologies, Inc.

Andy Cohen: Tell us about your background?

Robert Parker: I am somewhat of a serial-entrepreneur. At the University of Florida, I majored in Creative Writing (Fiction). I think I was closer to writing the next great American novel or entering the legal profession than founding America's next great technology company. However, after my first experience on the Internet, especially after my first experience with a pre-release version of Mosaic, I became a firm believer that the Internet would change everything.

Andy Cohen: Tell us about how Digi-Net Technologies got started?

Robert Parker: The company started with a large barn door that sat upon two filing cabinets that served as our first desk, about 800 square feet of cheap office space, and some borrowed computers functioning as our servers. It literally was the Wild West back then, and we made up the rules as we went along. We officially started in 1996, and focused on servicing Fortune 1000 sized organizations as their strategic advisor, offering assistance with web-based integration, infrastructure and development projects. Our extensive experience with these clients, led to the identification, development and commercialization of the technologies that currently make up our product mix.

Andy Cohen: Why did Digi-Net Technologies focus on the Internet?

Robert Parker: I believed the Internet would revolutionize every aspect of how people communicate, interact, and conduct business. The Internet will become more pervasive in every aspect of our daily lives. While this is nothing new today, we based our vision for the company when the Internet wasn't necessarily a sure thing. To be more accurate, our vision centers on the Internet, the proliferation of the Web, "just-in-time" delivery of applications over the network, and the overriding concern that in the end, the Internet is not just a series of servers and workstations, but rather the Internet should be about the people: connecting, interacting, and getting things done more efficiently. One of our mantras at Digi-Net is, "We breathe life into the web."

Andy Cohen: Why is Digi-Net still a privately held company instead of becoming a publicly traded company?

Robert Parker: It is apparent that many IT companies and dot.coms "went public" before they were really ready to do so. Many of these companies were actually using the public markets as a source for "venture-capital". It became a very slippery slope, and their primary focus became their quarterly financial results and meeting the short-term expectations of their investors and shareholders. When you're out to revolutionize technology and how people use it, you simply can't operate on a quarter-to-quarter basis. If and when we decide to go public, it will be on our terms, as a sustainable enterprise, with something of unique and significant value to offer investors.

Andy Cohen: Does Dig-Net have the financial resources to thrive in the 21st century?

Robert Parker: Absolutely, we have been profitable since day one. We never lost sight of Business 101: "Always have more money coming in than going out." It's amazingly simple. It boggles my mind that so many seemingly intelligent people think that they can continue to lose money indefinitely; citing eyeballs, page views, market share, and other nouveau metrics to raise their next round of funding. In the end, business must be about making money, returning shareholder value, and offering something genuinely needed by your customers.

Andy Cohen: How has your company been able to adapt to the changing interactive environment?

Robert Parker: We don't believe in simply adapting to the environment. Our customers pay us to provide them with technology that gives them a distinct competitive advantage. Great technical innovation doesn't graph out smoothly on a curve. It's occurs in huge jumps that create entirely new industries and make possible what previously hadn't been dreamed of before. That's why we do what we do. We walk a fine line between being bleeding edge and leading edge. As the famous quote goes, "You can tell the innovators by the arrows in their backs."

Andy Cohen: Tell us about some of your customers and how their relationship with Dig-Net Technologies has been mutually beneficial.

Robert Parker: We have an extensive client base consisting of the largest of Fortune 100 companies to small businesses. Our software and services allow companies to provide boundary-less interaction on the Web, which is opening doors of opportunity on the Web that many never thought possible. With our Groopz technology alone, clients have reported online sales gains of up to 70%. We always have our customers in mind, whatever we do, and they know that. Our products are 100% guaranteed and the dedication we provide to our clients, not only by our products but our actions, is providing us with constant referrals increasing our client base.

Andy Cohen: Are you afraid of competition and how do you differentiate yourself from them?

Robert Parker: I think the more appropriate term is paranoid. Any IT CEO that doesn't live in a constant state of paranoia should find another line of work. Innovation continues at breakneck speeds and staying several steps ahead of the sharks is a major component of a CEO's job description. However, paranoia and fear are two totally different animals. We're not afraid.

As for how we differentiate ourselves, comparing us to some of our competitors is like comparing night and day. Technologically, we operate several iterations above and beyond what our competitors are able to produce. We think years out, as opposed to the much shorter product cycles and visions offered by our competitors. Additionally, we're profitable, growing incredibly quickly, and have an established customer base that reads like the who's who of top web enterprises. We're a company that is founded on flawless execution. We have to be quicker, more agile, and smarter than our competition.

Andy Cohen: Over the past couple of years your company has launched several new products. Tell us about the major new product launches?

Robert Parker: Well, we've been busy at Digi-Net. We just released Groopz v2.0 the last week of February. Groopz brings the concept of people to an e-commerce storefront. For the first time, merchants can actually approach and directly sell to potential customers on their web site. I feel strongly that it will truly revolutionize the manner in which commerce is conducted on the Web. Additionally, we're launching Hubz, the web's first truly web-based instant-messaging product. It brings the concept of instant messaging to the web, and transforms the web page and web site to the buddy list metaphor. DigiChat is now the leading Java™ chat product on the market, and we continue to improve and extend our lead in the real-time community-building arena.

Andy Cohen: What are your plans for Digi-Net Technologies in the future?

Robert Parker: We plan to continue to offer our customers innovative products that push the envelope of what's possible. Our focus is on continuing our rapid growth while maintaining a sustainable business model. We want to develop some of the world's best technology, technology that impacts the daily lives of our customers, technology that makes a difference.

Andy Cohen: What do you feel is the most important thing an e-commerce company should do to make their company successful?

Robert Parker: Try and buy something from your own web site. Then have someone who's less computer savvy try and do the same. You'll be amazed at how much you can learn from such a simple exercise. Obviously we think that our technology, and our focus of "breathing life into the web" is paramount here. After all, technology cannot fully replace human interaction. Oh yeah, add Groopz to your site.

Andy Cohen: Do you feel that most e-commerce companies have a proper CRM programs in place?

Robert Parker: I feel that most e-commerce companies have taken the first step in recognizing the need for online customer support in order to increase customer satisfaction, but they have been waiting to see which providers survive and which do not before they invest in such a program. I am sure over the next two years we will see a huge increase in companies implementing such programs, but they do need to research carefully to determine if the application fits their overall goals. For example, Groopz not only provides for a complete CRM application but also a complete online sales application. For the same price you can offer live support and sell more to your online customers...who could argue with that?

Andy Cohen: Recently several Internet companies have fallen on to financial hard times. Do you feel this will slow down growth on the Internet or present new opportunities?

Robert Parker: I believe that it's a little bit of both. While we may have lost some potential clients through the financial hardships brought on by the IT recession, we are also gaining opportunities. Those companies who have survived the shakeout are turning to us for cost effective ways to maximize their potential within the E-Commerce industry. Also, there are the brick-and-mortar companies that have awakened to the fact that they need instant sales and customer support online just as they have in the "real-world" in order to stay ahead of the competition. The fact that Digi-Net has survived the shake-out as well proves our stability in the industry and gives us the opportunity to emerge as the leader in our space.

Andy Cohen: If you weren't running Digi-Net Technologies what would you like to be doing?

Robert Parker: Probably something very similar... Working on developing the next killer-app.