

Your government, online!

Local techies finalists in national contest

By HOWARD WEISS-TISMAN, Reformer Staff



From left, Ben Tucker, Michael Knapp and Derrish Repchick are the creators of ThisWeKnow.org which is currently in a contest through the Sunlight Foundation. (Zachary P. Stephens/Reformer)

BRATTLEBORO - Michael Knapp thinks the government can do a better job of getting data into the hands of average Americans.

Knapp, who is

Managing Director of GreenRiver.org, a Brattleboro software development company, believes that social change will come after more citizens learn more about their government and he's got a plan to make that happen.

GreenRiver.org, along with Intellidimension, another Brattleboro high tech company, is one of three finalists in a national competition to help the U.S. government revamp how it gets information into the hands of the public.

The two Southern Vermont companies joined together to design a Web site that would make it easier for citizens to access the thousands of pages of data that the various government agencies produce every year.

And the two small Main Street firms, which went up against 46 other mostly larger and more heavily financed companies from all over the United States, now have a chance to meet with some powerful Washington insiders to change how government information is delivered to the public.

"Too much data produces nothing but noise. But if we can get information into people's hands that is presented well and clearly and accurately people will make more informed decisions," Knapp said from his office overlooking the Connecticut River. "We're trying to help people make connections, so they can start to take control of their communities."

Knapp and his cohorts entered the Apps for America

contest, which is sponsored by The Sunlight Foundation, a non-partisan Washington group dedicated to increasing government transparency.

The Brattleboro companies developed their Web site, ThisWeKnow.org, that allows the user to enter a location in the search engine.

Reports from across the government that have recorded information on that location are gathered and the user can compare, for instance, a town's cancer rate with the toxic chemicals released by nearby factories and political contributions to area lawmakers.

Knapp said all of the various government agencies issue the reports and put out press releases occasionally on the data, but the Web site "takes the middleman out of the information presentation. Instead of the agencies controlling the story," Knapp said, "you get to tell the story."

Intellidimension Vice President of Product Development, Derrish Repchick, said the two companies put in weeks worth of work developing the site. They are flying to Washington next week to present their site, and Vivek Kundra, the Obama Administration's Federal Chief Information Officer, is expected to check out the work of the three finalists.

"It was a huge amount of data we had to work with. It was a challenge," said Repchick, who was responsible for the back end of the Web site where all of the data is accessed. "It was also fun and it gets some pretty important eyeballs on you."

Knapp is a big fan of what the Obama Administration has done to make government more transparent but he said there are still countless amounts of information out there that should be more readily available.

The winner of the contest will not necessarily win a government contract but Knapp said the contest and his site is one more way to get every citizen in the country to realize that it is their government and the fastest way to implement change is by getting them the information they need to demand it.

"We didn't do this for the money," Knapp said about the \$10,000 prize that will go the winner. "We want to break down all the separate silos of information and have people make connections. We did this because we believe technology can make a better future for everybody."

Voting for the best application is being done online at www.sunlightlabs.com.

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