

Wapple Canvas

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Geoff Nairn begins a new regular feature introducing interesting start-up businesses that offer potentially useful products and services.

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WAPPLE (wapple.net)

Wapple's Canvas is a web-based toolkit for building mobile websites which customise and render pages to display correctly whatever the device.

Around 5 per cent of website usage comes from mobile devices and the figure is growing fast. But often the experience disappoints because websites struggle to handle the great variety of mobile devices. "In 2004 we saw there was a need to optimise for the many different devices hitting our sites," says Anne Thomas, chief operating officer and co-founder of UK start-up Wapple.

She and co-founder Rich Holdsworth, a one-time games developer, had built a successful business selling wallpaper downloads for phones. "But we realised that we could not last long in the content business," she says. So they refocused on mobile website development and, as Wapple, launched Canvas.

The starter pack costs from £15 a month and despite the modest price tag, Wapple has attracted some heavyweight customers, including MTV, the Washington Post and rock band U2 which used the technology in its Make Poverty History campaign of 2005.

After raised £700,000 in two rounds of funding, Wapple now employs 20 and projects sales of £1m for the current fiscal year. It has filed a patent for its technology, which Ms Thomas sees as its key differentiator in a crowded market. "When the dust settles in this space, we want to be recognised for our technology," she says.

VEEDOW (www.veedow.com)

Remember Boo.com? The two young Italians behind social shopping start-up Veedow claim e-commerce has evolved considerably since lavishly funded Boo.com collapsed in 2000. Fabio De Bernardi, co-founder and managing director, says today's consumers have fewer aversions to buying online particularly in the UK, Veedow's principal market – so it has chosen London as its base.

But there are plenty of shopping sites today so can a start-up hope to stand out? "The big difference between us and price comparison sites is that they assume you already know what you are looking for," says Mr De Bernardi.

Veedow is for the undecided who want help deciding what to buy from people with similar tastes.

"We help people discover products that they will like," says co-founder Matteo Canzi Blanc, who shares the MD role. Veedow uses social networking and has profiles of its 3,000 users who are encouraged to post recommendations for others. If a user clicks on a product they get taken to the website of third-party retailer to complete the transaction and Veedow gets commission of 5 to 15 per cent.

Angel investors have put \$300,000 into Veedow which has a staff of five and minimal revenues so far, although the founders have high hopes for this Christmas. Should the commission-based model fail to scale, Veedow may try cost-per-click advertising and "white-label" business selling its technology to others.

TAPTU (taptu.com)

Taptu is a Cambridge-based mobile search company. With Google, Microsoft and Yahoo as competitors, most people would throw in the towel but Steve Ives, its CEO, is not for turning.

"This is one of the few markets in the current climate that is still capable of exponential growth," he says.

The internet giants are making bolder moves into mobile search. But Mr Ives argues they are unlikely to achieve the dominance they enjoy on desktops as they do not realise that most mobile searches are for entertainment not documents. Taptu's search engine focuses unashamedly on entertainment – YouTube video clips feature prominently in its results. Searches recently passed 100,000 and traffic is growing at around 7 per cent a week. To ramp up the business, Taptu needs more users but unlike rivals, it is not prepared to strike deals with carriers to get on their mobile portals.

"That is a very dangerous model for a start-up," he says. Instead, Taptu hopes word-of-mouth and deals with social networking sites will get Taptu better known among its target demographic of "mobile youth".

Taptu was founded in 2006 after Mr Ives sold his previous company Trigenix to Qualcomm for \$36m. A first round of funding led by 3i raised £5m and a follow-on "B" round is now being closed. Like McDonald's, Taptu hopes next year to be able to boast "1bn served", and if ad rates hold up, 1bn pages translates into revenues of around \$6m.

ZAMSANA (zamsana.com)

Mobile workforce solutions are commonplace but few vendors take much interest in the mobile working needs of

smaller businesses.

"When I looked at the market, there was nothing that addressed the pain points for SMEs," says Manju Fernando, Zamsana's CEO and founder.

His eureka moment came while studying an MBA at Edinburgh University. With a couple of other students, he founded Zamsana in 2007 to allow SMEs to take orders, manage customer relations and run financials while on the road using a mobile phone. Prior to coming to Edinburgh, Mr Fernando helped develop software for trading exchanges in his native Sri Lanka. The middleware that underpins exchanges is also used in Zamsana's platform to let mobile phones exchange data with common applications such as Sage or Quick Books.

The platform is also used to host Zamsana's own applications, the first being for expenses management. The software was developed in Sri Lanka, where 10 of Zamsana's workforce of 15 are based. Zamsana is running a pilot service with 10 customers and plans to launch commercially in the second quarter of next year 200a price of around £5 to £20 a month for each user.

The SME market is notoriously difficult to reach, more so if you are a little-known start-up. Zamsana has therefore decided to link up with a professional services firm. "Accountants or lawyers are the people that SMEs trust most," says Mr Fernando.

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