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Seminar to help start-ups start up

New group aims to give high-tech entrepreneurs tips, resources at forum

01/05/2003

By **IEVA M. AUGSTUMS** / The Dallas Morning News

Steve Mix has hopes of being a dot-com entrepreneur.

The 56-year-old from Bedford has two Internet start-ups – a discount airfare Web site and a discount prescription drug site. But Mr. Mix, a former computer technician for Sabre Holdings Corp., is having trouble carving out a niche in either market.

"It's a frustrating experience right now, not knowing where to go and how to get there," said Mr. Mix, who co-founded lowticket.com in January 2000 and drdiscount.com in June 2002. "I'm not real sensitive to comments. If I am doing something wrong, I want to know what and change it. I want my companies to be successful."

He's getting some help. Leaders of six local high-tech groups have formed the Technology Alliance of Dallas, which is designed to provide opportunities for high-tech start-ups. The group will host a free half-day entrepreneurship seminar at the University of Texas at Dallas on Saturday.

"It's not enough to just have a good idea anymore. You need to know the right people and have a good plan," said Howard Chen, vice president of the Dallas-Fort Worth chapter of Chinese Institute of Engineers, one of the alliance's founding groups. "Our plan is to introduce entrepreneurs to those people who could help foster those ideas. You never know – maybe one of those ideas will become the next great big thing."

Saturday's program, "Unleashing your Entrepreneurial Potential," will include panel discussions, networking opportunities and talks from venture capitalists and experts who can offer resources for new businesses.

"We want to minimize the gap between venture capitalists and all the

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talent in this area," said Sejal Desai, chief executive of the STARTech Foundation, another alliance organizer. "This is a great time to be starting a company as long as you have the right resources. Some people may just need that extra push in the right direction."

Mr. Mix said he is ready to be nudged forward. He and more than 200 other area entrepreneurs have signed up for the event at the University of Texas at Dallas' Conference Center, 2601 N. Floyd Road in Richardson, with hopes of being noticed.

Neil Kaden, president of the nonprofit Texas Venture Post, said Mr. Mix's situation is not uncommon among first-time entrepreneurs, especially since the tech bust of the last two years.

"No longer is it, 'If you build it, they will come.' You need to know how to build it, market it to people who want it and then only will they buy it," said Mr. Kaden, who will moderate one of the sessions. "It's tougher out there now than it was then, but the money is out there. We are going to help them find it."

Bijal Modi, a software engineer from Dallas, said he plans to attend alliance seminars to learn how he can tap into funding.

"Financing has been one of the toughest things for me," said Mr. Modi, 34, who has been trying to launch his Java-based development company, Jfocus.com, since January 2000. "I think if I start networking again, I may be able to find someone who will be interested in my company."

Mr. Chen, who is also a technology lawyer for Haynes and Boone LLP in Richardson, said alliance organizers hope the event will create jobs, hot products and future wealth for Dallas-Fort Worth entrepreneurs.

"Hopefully on Saturday some companies and investors will begin that all-critical dating period, get to know each other and see what they each can offer," Mr. Chen said. "The dating period isn't easy, and it may take a couple of tries, but at least some sparks may begin to fly. Maybe some companies will be born down the road."

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