

Experience gives company an edge

'Everything ... has been a rehearsal for this'

By KATHERINE YUNG
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It's a little after noon in downtown Ann Arbor, and Cesar Nerys and Doug Neal sit hunched over their laptops in orange and green cubicles.

Though it doesn't look like it, what they're doing could one day help many small businesses all over the United States use the Internet to grow their sales.

For more than two months, the two partners and a third one in southern California have been building a new kind of Internet advertising firm, Boomdash LLC.

They plan to work with small and mid-sized telephone directory publishers to create online listings for their customers. Many are small businesses that lack any kind of Web presence.

But that's just the first step. An innovative and crucial part of their strategy is to be revealed in late April when the company makes its debut at the Association of Directory Publishers' annual meeting in Orlando, Fla.

Boomdash is tightly guarding the details of its plans so it can get a head start against potential competitors.

But the company's services couldn't arrive soon enough for dozens of small directory publishers around the nation. They are struggling to survive as larger rivals, armed with more resources, go after their

customers.

Boomdash sees its mission as leveling the playing field for these smaller publishers.

"This is one of those instances where I am going to be able to do well and to do good," said Nerys, Boomdash's chief executive and founder.

A former director of e-sales and service for AT&T, Nerys also has worked with a few startup companies.

With Boomdash, the 55-year-old entrepreneur has a chance to apply all his years of experience and knowledge to build something new.

"It feels like everything else I've done has been a rehearsal for this," he said.

Nerys got the idea for Boomdash while doing non-profit work in Belize in 2006.

In that small Central American country, he saw how telephone directories operated electronically and dreamed of doing something similar in the

United States.

Nerys left AT&T after its sale to SBC, cashing out his stock options. But he didn't want to retire early.

Neal, Boomdash's chief operating officer, and Jack Horner, its chief technology officer, also bring experience to the venture. The two software engineers worked together at Mobile Automation, a suc-

cessful company Neal founded and then later sold.

Until they met Nerys, Horner and Neal had been doing consulting work and searching for their next startup opportunity.

An experienced crew

Nerys and his partners almost seem to be following a handbook on the proper way to start a company. They spend a lot of time making sure that their services will fit the directory publishers' needs.

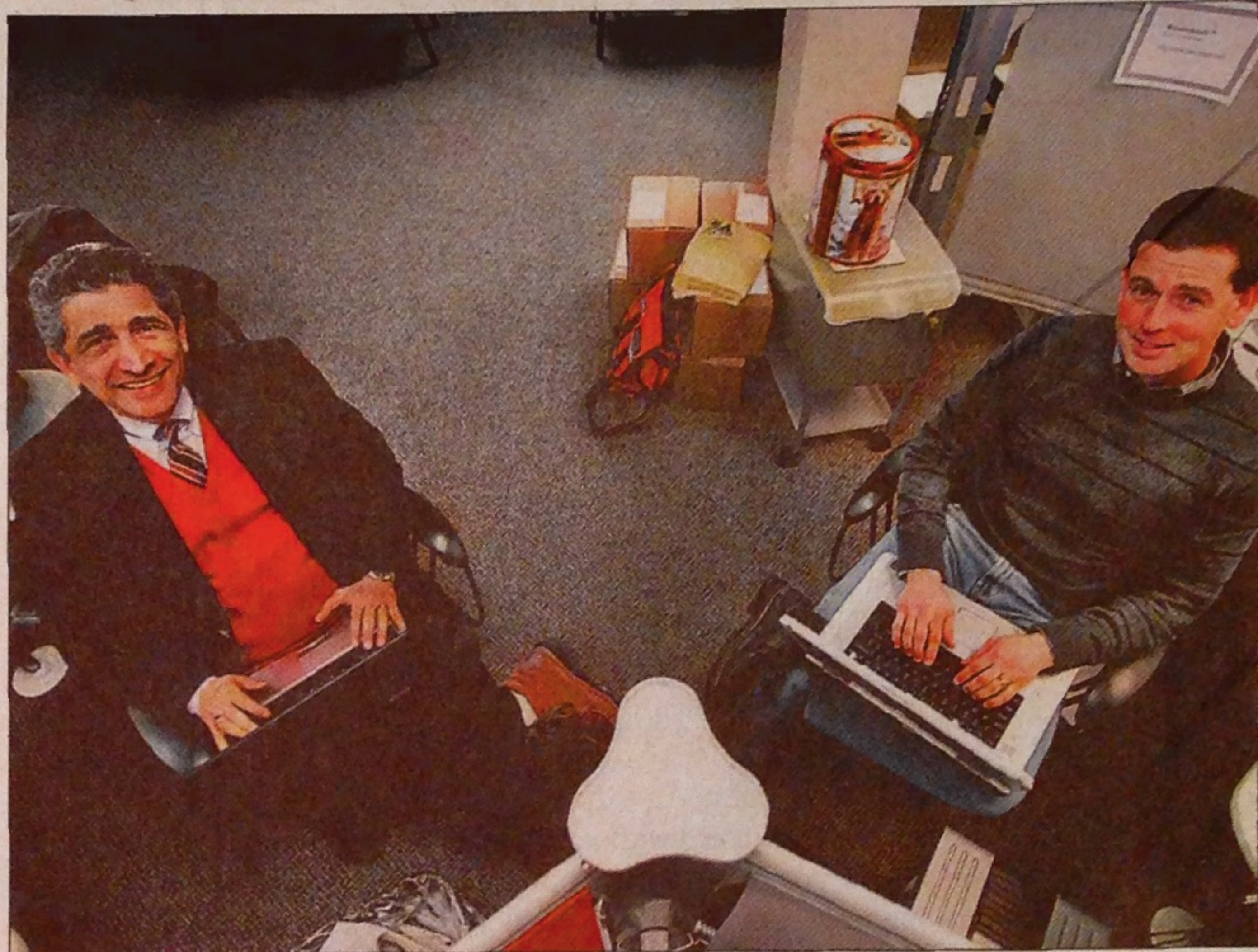
They have been meeting regularly with four potential customers, three in Michigan and one in Utah. One of the things they learned: The directory publishers needed someone to help them with online advertising on mobile devices such as cell phones and PDAs, not just computers.

In early January, the trio flew to California to meet with an executive Neal knew at one of the top venture capital firms in the country. They weren't asking for money. Instead, they sought his opinion of Boomdash.

Much to their surprise, he liked the idea.

"It was huge for us," Nerys said. "All the homework we have done has really paid off."

Past business success has given the partners an advantage many entrepreneurs lack. They have enough money to launch Boomdash on their own, and they can afford to go without a salary for a



REGINA H. BOONE/Detroit Free Press

Boomdash LLC Chief Executive Officer Cesar Nerys, left, 55, of Dexter works with partner Doug Neal, 41, of Brighton in office space at Ann Arbor SPARK, a business incubator that leases to startup companies.

while.

At the moment, Boomdash's expenses aren't high. It's leasing office space from Ann Arbor SPARK, an economic development group, and has hired some contract help.

Picking partners

From the beginning, the startup firm set clear roles for each partner. Neal and Horner are creating Boomdash's software program, now about 30% completed. Nerys works on sales and marketing.

To improve communication and productivity, the team holds a conference call at 11 a.m. Eastern time every weekday, since Horner works out of his home in Thousand Oaks, Calif.

But before agreeing to team up, the partners made sure they liked each other and would work well together.

Nerys and Neal met in the fall through a mutual acquaint-

ance at Ann Arbor SPARK. Both men had moved to Michigan a few years ago for family reasons.

It didn't take long for Neal and Nerys to bond. Neal, 41, found the concept behind Boomdash appealing.

"My first reaction was, 'It's too good to be true,'" said the Central Michigan University computer science graduate, who grew up in Mt. Pleasant.

Neal contacted Horner, who flew to Michigan to meet Nerys after the Thanksgiving holiday. He, too, found Boomdash intriguing.

"It seems to be a strong idea with possibilities," said Horner, a 42-year-old techie who still has his Atari 800, one of the first personal computers. "Our target customers need this badly."

Boomdash doesn't plan to seek outside investment until after it generates some revenues. With no customers now, "this is the weakest position

from which to negotiate," Neal said. The partners don't know yet how long it will take for Boomdash to break even.

But the partners already have been meeting informally with several Michigan venture capital firms to establish relationships and get feedback on their plans.

Boomdash's first big test is to come in March when it rolls out a prototype of its software for potential customers.

"This is really the fun part right now," Horner said. "The storms come later."

But even with experience and money, Nerys and his partners are all too aware that unexpected events outside their control could suddenly disrupt their plans.

"The biggest worry is always what you don't know," Nerys said.

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