

Life support



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 Roger Gill, Lake District franchisee

LOCALLIFE

Internet search directory



Michael Weingarten and Tony Martin

If you want to put something back into the local community while running your own successful business, then internet directory franchise Locallife could be right up your street

If you've read all those fascinating recent reports in the national press about topics as diverse as Britain's greenest cities or the UK's nerdiest areas and articles highlighting holiday trends and the most romantic towns, you may have wondered just how newspapers found these interesting facts and stats.

Look no further. Many of them come from information gathered by a franchised business called Locallife, a network of 325 internet directories covering every town and city in the UK. The directories contain links and contact information for over two million businesses, organisations and local amenities. The site receives a staggering 100 million hits a year across the UK from people interested in their own local areas.

Nowadays, at the click of a mouse, anyone can find out practically anything they want to know from the comfort of an armchair. Every year, about a billion people all over the world are seeking information via the internet about a limitless range of topics from the opening times of the local swimming pool to the cost of an airline ticket.

Locallife was originally set up in 1999. Its founder, managing director Michael Weingarten, has spent seven years with his development team refining the site, introducing new services and facilities, adding administrative functions and, generally, priming the websites to perfection before launching it as a franchise.

Michael takes up the story: 'I had an IT business in the early days of search engines and recognised that here was a global opportunity. While you could access plenty of information about big, national companies or international conglomerates, it was virtually impossible to find out about local businesses or amenities. I wanted to create a greater priority for all things local, including SMEs – not least because the vast majority of businesses in the UK are in this category and most consumers are looking for local suppliers, be that a plumber or a restaurant.'

'If I want to find an Italian restaurant online, for example, my local pizza place would not come up on a search engine – but it will be shown on Locallife. Similarly, if you want to find things for children to do in the school holidays now all you need to do is just click on Locallife where you can see everything that's going on in the area.'

Michael decided that all charities should receive free advertising on Locallife sites. He says: 'I believe that a local directory should include everything that may be of interest to the local community. It is also a way for franchisees to put something back into their local community.'

The Locallife business is highly structured and organised, and the management team has a massive range of experience in advertising sales to SMEs and now has six years of experience in selling the Locallife product range to thousands of businesses. Two sales directors who have a lengthy history in this field manage the sales side of the business. The management team also includes a chartered accountant with a wide range of business experience both in the UK and internationally.

The online directory gives full national coverage of thousands and thousands of different businesses. The first local directory was tested in Southend on Sea in 2000 when companies began to advertise and immediately enjoyed significant business benefits as a result. New customers have grown consistently year-on-year since then and now number over 2,500 in the one town. Customer retention has averaged

85 per cent year-on-year throughout that six-year period. The pilot site will achieve a turnover of over £400,000 in 2006/07.

With the exception of Southend and a number of other sites managed by the Southend team, a number of directories are now being offered as franchises. Each directory is fully established and has a very strong position on the major search engines and even the smaller areas receive over 100,000 hits per year. This makes implementation very straightforward and new franchisees are ready to start gaining new customers as soon as their training is complete.

New franchisees do not need an IT background or website design skills, since these are handled by the central team where the web design team has a huge range of experience, having built the website for over 1,000 different types of businesses. The franchisee fee is structured according to the number of businesses in the area and the existing visitor traffic. There are 1,800 different categories, from shops and restaurants to social services and community activities.

Training is tailored to the specific needs of each individual franchisee and may be extended for those who need extra tuition in a particular aspect. Typically, training takes about four or five days.

'I believe that we are offering something unique,' says Tony Martin, financial director and chairman of Locallife. 'We don't want our franchisees to get bogged down in endless admin and paperwork. Neither do we believe that we should be training franchisees to design websites, which is a highly specialised process requiring professionals to produce the best results. We have so much expertise in our central team to support franchisees and give their customers the very best quality services that will maximise interest in their business or organisation. We have two web design teams, each headed up by multimedia design graduates who have personally designed over 1,000 websites each.'



Locallife directors

The Locallife

franchise model has been under development for the past three years and was launched last October. Locallife was pleased to find that the majority of applicants already knew about the company because they had already used it as their preferred online local directory.

'In the last few years, everyone has begun to embrace technology and websites have moved from being perceived as a luxury and have increasingly become a business necessity,' comments Tony Martin. 'Small business owners recognise that a professional-looking website, which is well advertised, is the best, most cost-effective and convenient way for customers to find out what they do. They also know that their customers increasingly expect them to have a website and greater awareness creates more sales.'

'The latest government figures suggest that 40 per cent of SMEs do not yet have a website. Based upon our daily contact with businesses of all types, we know that they are all aware of the internet and the fact that at some point they will need to be part of it. This means that over the next couple of years someone will build over one million new websites. The objective for Locallife

is to build a significant proportion of these and at the same time to become the international internet local search directory and to create a brand name on the internet as strong as *Yellow Pages* is for paper directories,' Tony sums up.

Already, 12 additional franchisees have been recruited. The first of these, Roger Gill, has obtained the licence for Locallife Lake District and previously worked for his whole career in the organic food industry. He says: 'My children have now all gone through university and I see this as a perfect opportunity to change my lifestyle and to become my own boss for the first time. I was very attracted by the fact that the Locallife team have been selling exactly these products to thousands of businesses for a number of years and I found them a very friendly team that I can really get on with.'

An exclusive franchise licence is between £4,995 and £14,995 plus VAT, depending on town.

You can find out more by contacting Tony Martin on 01702 343411 or emailing tony.martin@locallife.co.uk.

MORE INFO

INVESTMENT LEVEL:
Between £4,995 and £14,995

WEBSITE: www.locallife.co.uk

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FRANCHISE CLASSIFICATION:
Internet search directory