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■ DIGITAL CONNECTIONS

Local company launches online Tip Exchange

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An Oklahoma City-based Web site development and hosting company has taken an age-old idea and brought it into the 21st century.

Tip clubs – groups of professionals that meet for breakfast or lunch and exchange contacts, sales leads and information – have been around since the dawn of business and industry. There is only one difficulty with joining a tip club: Members have to be able to meet at the same time at the same place.

Wheat Communications has come up with a way for business professionals in today's busy and varied workplace to take advantage of the benefits of a tip club while eliminating the logistics difficulty: host a tip club on the Internet.

Tip Exchange was launched earlier this week with clubs for more than 1,850 cities in the United States and Canada. There are no dues or fees to participate – membership is free.

"The biggest advantage of Tip Exchange is the ability to overcome both time and location obstacles," said Wheat Communications President Paul Cardin. "You can participate in a Tip

Exchange Internet Tip Club any time of the day or night. And you can do it from home or on the road. You'll never miss a meeting because of a scheduling conflict, and neither will the other members. And that means more contacts, more leads and more business."

Barbara Cardin, Wheat Communications co-owner, said that the couple's own mobility restrictions inspired the Tip Exchange idea.

"There are millions of home-bound business owners that would otherwise never be able to participate in a tip club," she said, such as those with physical limitations, family care-giving responsibilities and others. "We're proud that Tip Exchange can further empower business people with similar restrictions."

Unlike many traditional tip clubs, there are no limitations on the number of members per business category.

"By placing arbitrary limits on the number of members ... potential contacts are lost," she said. "And that means potential sales are lost, too. It's a free-enterprise economy out in the world, and it's a free-enterprise economy inside Tip Exchange. We're an early-bird worm-catching

kind of place."

With the potential for large membership and no meal costs or dues, Tip Exchange could present a significant advantage over traditional clubs for small, home-based businesses. In addition, it is possible to leverage networking time by belonging to more than one tip club in different cities, which would be virtually impossible in the traditional setting.

Businesses dealing in pornography, promoting illegal practices or racism, or that are controversial in nature are prohibited from membership in Tip Exchange. Members agree to visit featured Web sites (10 per week) and refer Tip Exchange to a total of 10 people – five inside and five outside of the member's geographical area. The main Web page can be found at www.tipexchange.com.

The Cardins formed Wheat Communications in 1998, and together with a staff of four people have been working on the Internet tip club idea for four years. The company specializes in helping businesses integrate traditional marketing efforts with the Internet. Paul Cardin said using the word "wheat" in the name has to do with the idea of "separating the

wheat from the chaff."

"There are a lot of people saying a lot of things about the Internet – some of it's true, some of it's a bit of an exaggeration," he said. "We're a little more down-to-earth.

"We're in this because we believe in it," he continued. "We believe in the Internet as a means of communication and we believe in the process of businesses networking together."

A native of Oklahoma City, Paul Cardin worked in the public accounting field until his retirement in 1995 and has been a member of numerous tip clubs. He has worked as a consultant to pro-family organizations and law enforcement in fighting child pornography and obscenity on the Internet.

Barbara Cardin has worked as a counselor in both the public and private sectors. She is an active member of the Greater Oklahoma City and South Oklahoma City chambers of commerce, a member of Rotary International, and is on the board of directors of the Oklahoma chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners.