

The Starve-Ups

Hunger for Success Brings These Entrepreneurs Together

By *Bridget Lynch*

Truth. Sharing. Honesty. These are three words more commonly heard in marriage vows than in the business world. But a group of Portland companies are making them work, and work well, for them in the corporate arena where words like Toughness, Secrecy and Advantage thrive.

Starve Ups is a group of 17 companies dedicated to helping each other create and sustain successful start-up businesses. Certainly the concept of an entrepreneurs' group is not revolutionary by itself—there have likely been entrepreneurs' groups ever since there were entrepreneurs. But Starve Ups adds some additional wrinkles to the idea that make it unique and uniquely successful among its predecessors. The group is small and exclusive by design and honesty reigns supreme, even occasionally to the point of being a bit brutal, because in the business world only the strongest survive.

The founding members came together after attending various forums and meetings meant to help entrepreneurs network and exchange ideas, says Mark Friess, CEO and co-founder of wired.MD and founding member of Starve Ups. Though they often left with pockets full of business cards, they were not able to find a place to get practical, real-world help with their companies.

“We went to a lot of events,” Friess says. “It seemed like most of it was topics for more evolved businesses—companies that were further along in the business cycle. We found that the talks that we were having with people in the parking lot after the meetings were actually more helpful.”

The founding group of seven companies put together Starve Ups as a place to share challenges, leads and to network without an alternative agenda, Friess says. It's a place where people can describe their situation and what they want to accomplish and the other members try to help, he said.

“We wanted to help each other succeed and talk about our businesses honestly,” Friess says. “We wanted to share the details of our companies, and the reality is that not everything is perfect and that is not always information you want to share. We needed an outlet to talk about the things that are a challenge and get the straight scoop from others in the same situation.”

Truth, sharing and honesty became the cornerstone of Starve Ups out of necessity and the group's exclusivity is a direct result. Today, the group numbers 17 companies—including the founding seven, which are all still in business.

“In a group like OEF (Oregon Entrepreneurs Forum) it is so big that there is no trust among its members,” says Vail Horton, chairman and CEO of Keen Mobility. “In a group like that, people maybe share resources but not the details of their own businesses.”

Friess and Horton met a few years ago and exchanged business cards. Horton joined Starve-Ups and their two companies have grown with their friendship.

“I met Vail around the time he was ready to move into his first office,” Friess says. “I knew there was space in our building so I told him about it and Keen Mobility moved in. In fact right now we are sharing our offices with (another company member) Rumblefish while they are renovating because of a fire in their offices. They were in a tough position after the fire and we had some space so it worked out. I think that kind of cooperation and help sort of encompasses the spirit of Starve Ups.”