

Chicago Tribune

Monday, August 8, 2011

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Sittercity.com founder has risen to the top thanks to passion, perseverance, self-promotion

Sittercity.com founder Genevieve Thiers has risen to the top thanks to passion, perseverance and tireless self-promotion, providing a model for other women entrepreneurs

The Internet, it turns out, is not always a friendly place if you're an expectant parent like Genevieve Thiers.

This was a surprising revelation for someone who built a career around using the Internet to help parents: Thiers is the founder and former chief executive of Sittercity, the Chicago-based technology company that pioneered the online matchmaking of families and caregivers.

During her seventh week of [pregnancy](#) — she's due to deliver identical twins in November — Thiers went on [Google](#) to look up whether it was safe to travel. She found an alarming post by a woman saying that flying between the seventh and 10th weeks would subject the unborn child to "cosmic radiation," causing irreparable harm during organ development.

When a concerned Thiers called her doctor's office, the nurse guffawed into the phone over the claim.

"It was such a shock to find that the Web is not your friend sometimes," Thiers said with a laugh. "What it is, really, is the combined social power of lots of very anxious parents kind of hitting you in the face. So I learned specifically to avoid message boards. But it definitely gave me a new view of content."

The last year has been a period of transition for Thiers, 33, who spent nearly a decade building a subscription service to help parents find baby sitters before starting a family herself. She passed the Sittercity CEO role to Martin Clifford, the company's chief operating officer and chief revenue officer, in 2010 and is preparing to launch her second Web startup in September.

In another important change, Thiers is tackling her new entrepreneurial venture without her longtime business partner: her husband, Dan Ratner, who helped her found and run Sittercity. Ratner is now working full time for President [Barack Obama](#)'s re-election campaign, which would not make him available for interviews for this story.

Although Thiers and Ratner no longer share a day job, they brainstormed the idea for the new company together. Contact Karma will use a combination of deals and recommendations from trusted contacts to match business users with service providers they need, from law firms to videographers.

For Contact Karma, Thiers is drawing on the lessons she learned while helming Sittercity for nine years, a process that had its share of challenges and hard-fought victories. Thiers' earliest attempts at raising venture capital got her "laughed out of the room," she recalled, while a second, ultimately successful effort coincided with the financial meltdown.

The company today has 54 full-time employees and more than 2 million members worldwide. It has expanded to other areas of caregiving, including pet sitting and elder care; a new job is posted on the site every two minutes. Sittercity also has a corporate program that allows companies to cover membership for their employees as a benefit.

The privately held firm does not disclose revenues, but spokeswoman Mary Schwartz said Sittercity's have doubled every year since receiving venture capital funding. Sittercity raised \$7.5 million in financing from investors led by Point Judith Capital and Apex Venture Partners in January 2009. In May, Baird Venture Partners and New [World Ventures](#) led a \$22.6 million round.

"To this day, I'm incredibly glad we didn't take VC until we did because it forced us to live on what's kind of a nice edge," Thiers said. "Every single day that you haven't taken VC and you're living on angel or seed money ... every single move you make is critical. You have no luxury to go out and make a frivolous buy. You can't make mistakes. We went for roughly six years doing a fantastic job of growing our revenue based on taking in very little, and I was proud of that."

The story of how Thiers founded Sittercity has become a classic tale in entrepreneurial circles. As an undergraduate at [Boston College](#), she saw a heavily pregnant woman

struggling up a long flight of stairs on campus to post fliers for a baby-sitting job. Thiers offered to take over so the woman could go home. While putting up the fliers, she had the idea for an online service that could connect parents with baby sitters.

Thiers' entrepreneurial career path wasn't as inevitable as that story suggests, however. She wanted to be an [opera singer](#), and it was as much fear of being a starving artist as sympathy for the pregnant woman on campus that motivated her to start the business.

"There is absolutely a version of me that went off into the opera world," Thiers said. "I don't know what she'd be doing right now, but I think about it a lot, actually. It was funny because when I did step back last year, I suddenly remembered that I had launched Sittercity to be able to sing. ... It just goes to show, when you have a labor of love, you can throw yourself into it so wholeheartedly that you almost forget other pieces of your identity for a while. But then when you come back out, they're there for you."

She's now devoting more time to singing, including recording some songs she wrote herself. Thiers moved Sittercity from the Boston area to Chicago in 2002 so she could study opera at [Northwestern University](#). After graduating with her master's degree in 2004, she helped start and occasionally performs with OperaModa, a Chicago opera company that performs pieces in English vernacular and showcases emerging artists.

Sometimes business and music intersect in unexpected ways. At the 2010 TEDGlobal conference — which features short talks from "thinkers and doers" from a broad cross section of fields — in Oxford, England, Thiers mentioned offhandedly to TED curator [Chris Anderson](#) that she was trained in opera and musical theater. Days later, Thiers and Ratner were seated in the Oxford Playhouse when a technical glitch caused the stage lights and microphones to go out. Anderson called Thiers up to the stage, and she sang a selection from "The Sound of Music" as a little impromptu entertainment.

"That's the sort of presence that she can have," Clifford said. "I don't think there are many people like that."

Clifford, an operating partner at Providence, R.I.-based Point Judith Capital, recalled that when his firm was considering an investment in Sittercity, his early research was spent "trying to figure what Sittercity was. I was confused between Genevieve the opera singer and Genevieve the businessperson."

As Clifford dug deeper, he determined that Thiers was "totally focused" on her company and was onto an important business idea. Thiers' tenacity also impressed Clifford, who now has what he calls the "20,000 flier test" on his due diligence list when evaluating an entrepreneur. He measures whether someone has the drive, as Thiers did during Sittercity's early days, to print and locally distribute 20,000 fliers.

"People hear of Sittercity, and they jump to the idea of a casual baby sitter," Clifford said. "But once you start to get more involved with the company, you start to realize a couple of things. First of all, there are some innovative things going on like the corporate

program, which Genevieve invented. ... You also realize very quickly that Sittercity is not about casual baby-sitting. It's much more about child care and the enormous pain that working families have in trying to find child care, especially those that have not got great deep connections."

People who have worked with Thiers describe her as vivacious and enthusiastic, with the ability to sell her vision to anyone.

"A lot of times, the traits that make an entrepreneur special might not be something you can learn," said Lon Chow, general partner at Chicago-based Apex Venture Partners. "She's stubborn. She's got perseverance. She's a shameless promoter of her and her business, which is absolutely what you need to get the word out. She's passionate about her business."

Even with Point Judith Capital's support, seeking the first round of venture capital at the end of 2008 was a tumultuous process. Sittercity needed outside investment to accelerate its growth. But the timing was rocky, as Thiers and Ratner were in talks with venture capital firms just as the global financial crisis was escalating.

"It was the worst period that I can remember, really, in my history with the company," Thiers said. "It was just a horrifying feeling, like Lehman went down and suddenly that day, we were on calls with firms we'd been talking to, and suddenly anything we'd been talking about before was off and it was time to renegotiate. It was immediate, like a garage door slamming."

The [stress](#) of that period was so great that Thiers said she found herself "physically shaking most of the time." She would calm down only when she was delivering a pitch to potential investors. Thiers credits Sean Marsh, general partner at Point Judith Capital, for steering the process to a successful end. He recruited Apex as a co-investor after another firm backed out.

Marsh had first heard of Sittercity through his wife, who was pregnant with twins at the time and had the site recommended to her by her obstetrician and their son's pediatrician. As he studied Sittercity's customer data, he determined the company "had a good chance of weathering a potentially nasty recession," he said. "Dan and Gen had a business that was very capital efficient, and they didn't have a huge burn. They're pragmatic and tenacious people, and I felt they'd figure it out even when things got tough."

As spouses who ran a startup together, Thiers and Ratner are somewhat unusual in the business world. Some investors were leery of backing Sittercity because they were concerned about how marital dynamics would affect operations.

For Thiers, however, the pairing was vital to Sittercity's success. Ratner already had experience founding Internet companies and came from a technology background, so he gave Thiers business advice and fixed bugs in the early version of the company's website. He was one of the first investors in Sittercity and eventually became chief technology

officer.

"Gen is obviously the founder and the personality of the company," Chow said. "Dan, credit to him, has faith in Gen and financially made the initial investment and was very instrumental in helping her build the business on the operations side, the blocking and tackling."

Thiers said Ratner's counsel proved especially useful on occasions when she was feeling so overwhelmed by her responsibilities that she was desperate to hire someone. Her husband would advise her to "wait for the perfect person and not go with someone who was a partial fit."

Marsh described the couple as complementary because Thiers is "a classic, big-idea kind of entrepreneur" while Ratner is "a technical, very meticulous, focused engineer." Marsh was also struck by how they had crafted a "very structured legal agreement" governing issues such as dividing stock and who would stay on the board in the case of a marital split.

"They were very thoughtful and forward-thinking and mature," Marsh said.

Thiers and Ratner remain on Sittercity's board of directors. And while they won't be running Contact Karma together, the company was born out of conversations the couple had about using the Web to capture the kind of casual verbal recommendations that are shared among friends, neighbors and co-workers.

Thiers describes Contact Karma as a "social recommendation engine." The platform is aimed at businesses seeking service providers recommended by people they trust. The site also will offer discounts from many of the vendors on the site. To pique subscriber interest, Contact Karma will send out daily deals on lower-priced items, such as lunch delivery or admission to a business networking event.

"I find it best not to change user behavior, but moving it is not impossible at all," Thiers said. "And instead of somebody picking up the phone and calling me (for a recommendation), I'd love for them to go to Contact Karma and put it in. So I'm trying to move that behavior in the same way that instead of picking up the phone and calling your friend, you went online to find a sitter."

Thiers is building Contact Karma with Maureen Wozniak, a former sales executive at payroll processing company [ADP](#) who runs a business-to-business group buying site called BtoBcity.com. The two women met at a May luncheon hosted by the Chicago-area chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners. They discovered that they were working on similar concepts and decided to join forces, combining Thiers' expertise in online marketing and entrepreneurship with Wozniak's corporate experience in B2B sales.

Because Wozniak has two children of her own, parenting talk gets mixed in with business

planning. During a recent meeting, Thiers was concerned that she couldn't feel her twins moving, and Wozniak reassured her.

"Even though she's talking high-level strategic stuff, she's fully aware of where she's at," Wozniak said. "She's fully engaged. It's fun to watch because I ran sales meetings when I was eight months pregnant. ... I'm the veteran mom saying, 'Mine didn't move for months — don't worry about it.'"

Thiers has a theory about how women of her generation are tackling the perennial challenge of balancing their families and careers. She sees them dividing their lives into segments, focusing on work during the first 10 years after college, then spending 8 to 10 years with their children before re-entering the workforce, often as entrepreneurs.

For Thiers, the ideal dynamic would be to connect women in these different stages so they can help each other — not unlike what's happening with her and Wozniak.

"Maureen reminds me of me entrepreneurially about 10 years ago — she just hasn't lived it — whereas I'm about to go and have twins and I'm asking her for parenting advice. It's one of those really cool things," she said. "I think it's a really a great balance for women, and I think if we could settle here, we'd truly be pretty happy."