July 27, 2009

Local programmers make sure there's an app for that

Local developers try to cash in on success of iPhone's applications

By Erika D. Smith
erika.smith@indystar.com

Two years ago, Ron Blaisdell was living quietly in Carmel -- retired from his career in information technology.

But the promise of riches from creating downloadable applications -- or apps -- for Apple's popular iPhone brought Blaisdell back to work. And it has inspired other Hoosiers to do the same, developing applications that do everything from finding coupons for sneakers to setting up conference calls.

Computer programmers are creating apps as a side job or quitting their day jobs altogether to pursue their iPhone dreams full time. Some create apps for increasingly eager corporate clients. Others create the applications for themselves. Either way, people liken it to a gold rush.

"There's gold in them there hills," said John Wechsler, president of Indianapolis Web startup FormSpring, which launched an iPhone app late last year that lets users create Web forms.

Blaisdell has sold an app to Gen Con, sponsor of the gaming convention of the same name that draws thousands to Indianapolis each year. The app, Gen Con Indy Mobile, will help attendees find the events they are interested in and connect with other convention-goers via Facebook and Twitter.

Interest in such apps has exploded in the year since Apple launched the App Store so iPhone and iPod Touch users could download applications made by outside developers.

Since then, the store has amassed more than 65,000 apps, and users have downloaded more than 1.5 billion of them.

In comparison, BlackBerry maker Research in Motion has about 2,000 applications on its App World store, which opened April 1. Palm has about 30 applications for its much-hyped Palm Pre phone, but users have downloaded them more than 1.8 million times.

Many apps in Apple's store are now free, a result of an increase in inventory and a decrease in price point.

Developers get a 70 percent cut of the sale of any app with a price tag, with the rest going to Apple. The developers set the price, and popular apps can lead to big profits.

Industry insiders say there's more work available than there are developers.

"People are actually searching for iPhone developers, so you don't have to sell your services," said August Trometer, an iPhone app veteran.

Blaisdell's company, LaViaz Mobile, hopes to turn a profit by capitalizing on a number of revenue models for the apps it creates.

Gen Con hired LaViaz Mobile to create and run the Gen Con Indy Mobile app for two years.

The app is being reviewed by Apple -- a necessity for all apps. But once it's approved, Blaisdell said, he plans to sell it to other organizations that hold large conventions. That underlying app is called EventView.

Trometer has a different business model for his Yowza!! app: advertising.

The free app, which is available in the App Store, is basically a digital coupon book that serves up offers from merchants based on a user's location.

Merchants pay a fee to Yowza!! to advertise their promotions. Trometer and his business partner, "Heroes" star Greg Grunberg, already have signed up The Finish Line, Pier 1 Imports, Sears and other retailers.

So far, Yowza!! has been downloaded a half-million times.

Both Yowza!! and Gen Con Indy Mobile are targeted to consumers. But there's a cadre of apps targeted to the business market.

For example, apps for FormSpring, e-mail marketing services company ExactTarget and conference-call provider HeyOtto are designed to supplement a company's core business.

"It's actually led us to new business," Wechsler said. "People actually find us in the App Store."

But with tens of thousands of apps in the store, many of them similar, those that prove most popular generally serve a purpose.

"A lot of people think that 'oh, anything you throw on the iTunes Store will sell,' " said Jonathan Huer, director of emerging technologies at Ball State University and creator of the Alternate Endings app. "That's not true."

Therefore, developers who've successfully sold apps to the masses are in high demand.

Trometer and fellow developer Chris Patterson of LaViaz Mobile are hoping to meet that demand in Central Indiana by forming a trade group.

The Indy iPhone Dev group meets for the first time next month.

"All of a sudden, something gets hot," Blaisdell said, "and people want it, like, yesterday."