

“Mini Cities” or Just Big Enough?

When Ana Abraham and her husband Steve moved to New Tampa in 2004, she felt isolated. Having lived in Ann Arbor, Mich. for a number of years, they had known their neighborhood businesses and were a part of their community. “After moving here, I longed to feel connected to my community. I wanted to feel like a ‘regular’ and wanted to make New Tampa my new home,” she says about her move to the Tampa suburb.

Ana and Steve had been associated with some of the biggest Internet companies in the 1990s, and together they decided to bring their technological experience and skill to small businesses in their new community. “I wanted our local restaurants, salons, gyms and all local businesses to have the same kind of Internet marketing and resources that made national companies in New York and Los Angeles millions. I believe in small business and I believe in local communities,” she says.

At the same time people were beginning to connect online to people through social networking. “I realized that people may be connected online but not necessarily with the people and resources they need in their own community.” Her first response was to develop the New Tampa Directory that she launched in 2006 to such good response that she began receiving requests for similar directories. So she repurposed the software for a new and expanded platform and began franchising her concept a year later. Now under the corporate umbrella of [Mini Cities](http://www.minicities.com) (www.minicities.com), the company has four franchises and has just announced its availability for new franchisees.

“When we began franchising, we intentionally limited our franchise growth to learn more about how to offer the best franchise opportunity. We are so pleased to say

that our new franchise offering is different from any franchise out there. We have created a new concept in franchising – a real WIN-WIN.” She adds, “We have designed our franchise for women in local communities who had a great professional career before they had children. We provide a way for them to get back to creating a fantastic income and own a business they can be proud of! We have created a franchise that has such a low franchise fee that we are about to flip the franchise world on its ear. It is all very exciting.”

Abraham describes Mini Cities as online localized directories for great suburban communities surrounding major cities, offering localized business listings, coupons, events and reviews that are specifically for those neighborhoods. The company’s newest offering, “It’s The Big Deal,” is a group buying module that allows Mini Cities visitors to buy great deals from local merchants – similar to what Groupon and Living Social do -- except that Mini Cities keeps the deals within driving distance of their site users’ homes.

“As opposed to many of our competitors, Mini Cities focuses on exactly what our audiences are looking for – in the geographic area in which they choose to do business,” she says. “This creates an extremely loyal and regular client and provides great business results for advertisers and franchisees.”

The typical Mini Cities user is a woman between the ages of 25 and 50, with a household income in excess of \$60,000 – someone who wants to find offers and resources in her own neighborhood community. Not surprisingly, then, this also reflects the demographics of Mini Cities franchisees, who are typically educated women, often stay-at-home moms or small business owners. These women are interested in a professional business they can run from home, with flexible hours, that allows them to

use their community connections for profit. “I know this audience, because I am this audience,” she says.

With a background in software development and Internet marketing, she is president and CEO. Her partners are her husband Steve, an expert in SQL Server and .Net technologies who serves as CTO; and new to the team, former CEO of TruLiance LLC George Shand, who serves as COO.

As for growth, Abraham hopes to reach 100 franchises by the end of the year. “Look out, this is about to explode,” she says. She believes they were a little ahead of the curve when they began franchising the concept of hyperlocal sites, but they have learned a lot about franchising during the past two years and understand the concept of mutual benefit for franchisor and franchisee. “I think the audience has matured into the concept, now that so many people play and work online,” she adds.

Looking back at the past several years, she offers some advice for new entrepreneurs. “Just do it,” she says. “Don’t get stuck in analysis paralysis. If something doesn’t work 100 percent like you wanted it to, simply take that opportunity to change your decision. There’s no such thing as a perfect plan, and if you wait for that, you’ll never take action.” And one final note: “Get advice from experts and those who have gone before you. Tampa Bay has so many talented people here. We feel very fortunate to have had STAR Tec and to be part of the Accelerator program.”

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