

DEERCHANNEL.COM?

Contributed by Scott Bennett
Tue, Mar 27, 2007, 11:13 AM

Okay, the meeting wasn't over coffee; it was over Mexican food at Blue Mesa (though I had just come from another meeting over coffee down the street). But, who can pass up the sweet potato chips and salsa at Blue Mesa? An acquaintance of a friend (who I did have coffee with) had suggested I meet Patrick Seaman. A phone call, a few emails and a few days later Patrick and I were tucking into the daily special at Blue Mesa. You see, Patrick is part of a very interesting web startup – DeerChannel.com.

Like you, my first reaction to DeerChannel.com was, “the website where you can shoot deer remotely?, that's a winner (not)”. But no, DeerChannel.com is a website dedicated to the conservation and understanding of deer and other native Texas wildlife. According to their website DeerChannel.com exists “…for the purposes of encouraging management and conservation of wildlife, to further awareness and understanding among the general public, and to enhance, protect, and conserve the management of wildlife through scientific understanding.”

DeerChannel.com is a web-enabled broadcaster of, well, deer and wildlife activity from a 1500 acre ranch near Stephenville. Video production is done by capturing images from both static cameras and deer-mounted cameras. That's right. The ‘deer-cam’ has made its debut. It's currently the ‘buck-cam’ but I understand the ‘doe-cam’ and the ‘fawn-cam’ are not too far away. Who know's, with nanotechnology maybe they'll soon have the ‘wild-turkey cam’ (the bird, not the drink).

As I listen to Patrick and understand the concept I'm thinking “only in a web-enabled world would a business model like this be conceived”. But, here's the interesting part – both you and I know people here in Texas and other areas that are deer hunting fanatics. All you have to do is note the success of Bass Pro Shops or Cabela's to see this. In fact, it is my understanding that the economy surrounding deer hunting in Texas is greater than that of the cattle industry in Texas (unfortunately, I haven't done a thorough job of fact checking – so if you can corroborate, please let me know). And, have you ever traveled to other states with a fair size rural area and deer population during deer season? I recall doing some consulting in Wisconsin during deer season and being amazed at the absenteeism. The attitude was “its deer season, what do you expect?” The potential audience for this is huge.

The DeerChannel revenue model is based upon subscription fees, advertiser fees and sponsorship. According to Patrick, the revenue stream is small but growing and not doing too badly for a very new and as yet, somewhat prototyped, website. If DeerChannel can successfully hook into the deer hunting community it will be gang-busters.

Science and conservation are key drivers for the folks behind the website. DeerChannel has recently created a relationship with Dr. James Kroll, appointing him as senior wildlife biologist. Dr. Kroll is the Director of the Institute for White-Tailed Deer Management and Research at Stephen F Austin University and is known in the circles as “Dr. Deer” (not Dr, dear …).

Additionally, Patrick and I spoke at great length about the technical challenges involved with the concept of a ‘deer-cam’. Imagine what it takes to have a wireless video device on a large, wild animal in all types of weather conditions. Apparently there have been a fair number of different approaches to try to make this work before getting to the one being used. The one thing I didn't ask Patrick was if there is a video of them getting this camera on the deer. That's gotta be one to see. But, Patrick's fairly adept at technical challenges, having been involved early on in the Broadcast.com startup as well as writing a book on web streaming media.

To see for yourself what the results of deer-cam technology can be this link takes you to a sample video (<http://www.deerchannel.com/demo/samples.aspx>). It's incredible to see the world from a buck's perspective, including sparring with another buck. Patrick tells me that they have already uncovered unknown facts about deer from their short time up; one being that they have discovered that deer eat underwater vegetation and another that deer slurp water instead of lapping it like a dog.

Who knew I'd come in for sweet potato chips and leave knowing more about deer than the whole world did just months ago. The dynamics of business and the free market and the innovative capability of the internet continually amaze me. Dallas abounds with thought leaders like those at DeerChannel who are taking ideas in totally new directions, directions that are so inconceivable yet leap out at you once they are uncovered. What else is out there? Guess I'll have to go grab a cup of coffee and find out.