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Blessing in disguise for monks' business

Two O.C. public relations firms help group of clergy in Wisconsin make a success story out of Internet firm.

By **ANDREW GALVIN**

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For the Rev. Bernard McCoy, a Catholic monk, it was an answer to a prayer.

Karen Walker, a San Juan Capistrano public relations consultant and fellow alumnus of Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, had learned of McCoy's plan to start a Web-based company to help support the Wisconsin abbey where he lives with other monks of the Cistercian order.

"If you ever need P.R., give me a call," she said.

Boy, did he. And boy, could she help.

With a boost from an international wave of publicity catalyzed by Walker and Sinan Kanatzis of San Clemente's **K-Comm**, the monks' business has gone from nothing to \$2.5 million in revenue in three years.

LaserMonks.com, operated from the Cistercian Abbey in Sparta, Wis., sells discounted printer cartridges and other office supplies over the Internet. Income above what is needed to feed the monks and run the abbey is given to charity.

This week, McCoy is in Southern California to speak to business groups, including the Coastal Business Exchange at 7 a.m. today at the Jolly Roger Restaurant in Laguna Beach. He and Walker had a chance on Tuesday to recount how they told - and sold - the monks' story.

"At the beginning it was a question of how do we market ourselves," McCoy said. "We didn't have the big bucks to put into it. For us, the best way was obviously through the press to start with, because it's a free way for us to get out there."

Walker was editing an alumni newsletter for Thomas Aquinas College. She published a story about McCoy's vocation to the priesthood and remembered having met him when he was a student running a small export business from his dorm room.

"I remember thinking this student has a lot of business savvy and that's not a typical Thomas Aquinas College student," she said. The Catholic college's curriculum is a Great Books program in which students read classic texts like Plato and Shakespeare, then discuss what they've read.

The alumni newsletter article mentioned McCoy's plan to go into the Internet business. That's when Walker made her offer of public relations help. McCoy took her up on it.

Walker, whose business focuses on promoting nonprofits, approached Kanatzis, whose firm specializes in technology and Internet marketing, seeking to tap his expertise.

"I saw his eyes light up at LaserMonks," she said.

Working as partners, the two firms began to promote LaserMonks. But first, they had to wait for McCoy and the monks to get their Web site up and running.

The business got off the ground in late 2002, but it was a slow start. LaserMonks did only \$2,000 in revenue that first year.

Early in 2003, Walker decided to pitch the LaserMonks story to wire services, figuring it would be more efficient than trying to interest individual newspapers one by one. She telephoned the Los Angeles bureau of Reuters and managed to interest one of its editors. But the editor was busy with other stories and didn't see any hurry to cover LaserMonks.

Walker was persistent. "I'd call and then I'd wait and then I'd call again," she said. After three months, her effort paid off. Reuters ran a story about LaserMonks that was picked up by newspapers across the country.

Sales at LaserMonks shot up. "We got a big media bump," McCoy said.

From there, word of mouth took over. Other media, seeing a good story, came calling. McCoy and the monks were featured in radio, TV and print stories as far away as Ireland and the Netherlands.

McCoy knows he has a good story to tell and says "it's something we're continuing to exploit." He ticks off the angles that can be pitched: "You have we're monks, you have monks doing business, monks in high-tech, always a nice contrast ."

The monks expect their revenue to double or triple this year as a national contract to supply Catholic and other faith-based hospitals kicks in. Managing that growth is easy because the monks don't manufacture or distribute, they just take orders, which are then fulfilled by partner companies, McCoy said.

"We have no problems admitting we're middle-monks," he said.

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