

Kluster.com strives to build a better world

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By Matt Ryan
Free Press Staff Writer

Ben Kaufman will launch his company's new Web site this month. Three days after the launch, something will happen, and the world will change.

That's the plan, anyway.

The site www.kluster.com, will serve as an online forum where a visitor can pitch an idea, like for a new product, have it assessed and shaped by other visitors --the potential market -- and developed.

"The products will be developed by the world instead of by seven people in a lab," Kaufman said. "We're interested in unlocking the brains of the world. There are too many ideas that don't take the next step."

Kaufman anticipates one such idea will take the next step of changing the world 72-hours after the site's Feb. 18 launch.

The 21-year-old Champlain College dropout used this approach to design iPod accessories with his former company Mophie. Kaufman sold the company, which he founded in high school and chose to pursue over college, in August. He has since invested "upward of \$1 million" into the Kluster project.

Over the weekend Kaufman introduced a demo of the Kluster site to the public from a studio above Bueno y Sano on College Street in Burlington. A week after the launch, Kaufman will present Kluster at the annual TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) Conference in Monterey, Calif., where "1,000 of the world's most remarkable people" gather to talk about ideas, according to the TED Web site. Previous "remarkable" speakers include Al Gore, Richard Branson and Bono. The Sampling Foundation, a nonprofit organization, owns TED.

Saturday night, Kaufman, drinking a Starbucks coffee with a tie wrapped loosely around his open collar, and several staffers helped the first dozen visitors navigate the demo site from seven computers. Nearly 100 people attended the event Friday, he said.



Ben Kaufman (right), Burlington based-entrepreneur, hosts a brainstorming session and demonstration of new Web site, www.kluster.com, over the weekend in Burlington. The Web site, which will be launched Feb. 18, will serve as an online forum to develop products.
JORDAN SILVERMAN, for the Free Press

Text on the site generally avoids capitalization. Visitors shape ideas using Kluster lingo. "Sparks" are proposed solutions to "phases," which are "manageable deliverables" of projects. "Amps" are proposed enhancements to sparks, helping to make said sparks ready for "prime time." "Watts" are a form of currency visitors can invest in ideas.

"People get the concept," Kaufman said. "To explain how 'watts' work really depends on the demographic. People who do online networking get it."

Kaufman's company will charge a brokerage fee for projects that get developed. Ideas for products presented thus far include a portable mosquito net and a "Road Rage Buster," conceived by Marc Estrin, 68, of Burlington.

Estrin's idea is to mount on the back of a car an LED screen that could say "I'm sorry" when a driver accidentally cuts someone off.

"I've wanted all my life to say 'I'm sorry,'" Estrin said.

Estrin worried, however, about someone stealing his idea from the site.

Kaufman maintains that even if an outside company steals an idea, and develops an imitation "Road Rage Buster," Estrin, should he develop a legit "Road Rage Buster," with the help of a grassroots operation mobilized through Kluster, will have produced the superior product.

"You have the better brand, the brand built by the people," Kaufman said. "The power of community is the best protection of an idea."

Kaufman added lawyers might think differently.

Richard Miller, 54, of Hinesburg, an inventor and computer programmer involved in the sustainable forestry sector, wanted to stay on the cutting edge with Kluster.

"I'm interested in plugging myself into the system," Miller said. "I'm not sure about the watts and amps, but the general idea, it's a very great concept."

Contact Matt Ryan at 651-4849 or mryan@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com.