

# 904

NORTHEAST FLORIDA'S BUSINESS & EXECUTIVE LIFE AUTHORITY

**BEER**  
IT DOES A  
BODY GOOD  
IT'S GOOD  
BUSINESS,  
TOO << PAGE 48

**WATCH**  
& **LEARN**  
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TIMEPIECE IS  
AN IDEAL  
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**STINK?**

DAVID BROWN, CHAIR,  
CEO AND PRES. OF  
WEB.COM WANTS TO  
BUILD YOU A NEW ONE

DO ONLINE  
REVIEWS  
REALLY  
MATTER?  
YES, NO &  
MAYBE  
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**OF PRACTICE**



# DAVID BROWN

## SMALL BUSINESS MAN

**THOUGH SLIGHT IN STATURE, DAVID BROWN THINKS BIG AND SAYS HIS COMPANY HAS ITS EYE OUT FOR THE LITTLE GUY.**

Does your website stink? If you own a small business, the answer is probably, “yes.” It might look good and all the features and links may work just fine. But when was the last time you asked yourself “What is my website supposed to do?” or “Can my customers actually find it?” David Brown and the few hundred writers, graphic artists, account representatives, programmers and executives clustered in a relatively nondescript office building south of town believe they have the solutions to your online problems. And, for a small monthly fee, they are eager to share them with you and their other customers around the country and world.

BY JOSEPH WHITE • PHOTOS BY AGNES LOPEZ

### **BROWN, 58, IS ALMOST CERTAINLY THE CITY'S LEADING AUTHORITY**

on Zoroastrianism, an ancient religious philosophy based on the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster. He has the Ivy League diploma to back it up. Not that early monotheistic religions come up in conversation much at cocktail parties but if they did, Brown is the man to talk to. Not that he is likely to be schmoozing it up at many cocktail parties. The self-described hermit is more than happy to spend a weekend afternoon in Ponte Vedra Beach with his wife Pat, two grown children and two grandkids, and then finish the night reading a good book or a few of his favorite blogs.

During the week Brown is the chairman, chief executive officer and president of Web.com, a 2,000-person publicly traded firm that is headquartered just a short drive off I-95, not far from Baptist South hospital. His collection of titles and seat on the board means he has directed the company's acquisitions, integration and product development efforts, as well as the growth of the company, including its initial public offering in 2005.

Previously, he founded Atlantic Teleservices, a technology service firm in 1997. That company became a part of Website Pros in 1999. Website Pros subsequently purchased Web.com and assumed its name in 2007. Brown's techie pedigree belies the fact that all his web-based business ventures are really somewhat accidental second-career enterprises.

He recalls the first computer he ever worked on being an enormous banking machine that was about the size of a refrigerator turned on its side. He is a banker at heart, and has been since his days riding a bike up and down Third Street in Jacksonville Beach.

Brown is a Jax native, more or less. His father was in the Air Force before retiring and relocating the family to Jacksonville

Beach, where he worked as a teacher at Fletcher High School. David and his brother Doug grew up at the Beaches, with both attending Fletcher. He over-achieved in high school and earned himself an acceptance letter to Harvard. After four years in Boston, he returned south—a little bruised and tougher for the experience, he says—and proceeded to work his way up the ranks in banking and finance. A two-decade career saw him serving in leadership positions at both Barnett Bank and Florida National Bank, before moving on to Riggs National Bank in Washington, DC. Next, he became a founding partner at Carlyle International, a private equity group. Fast-forward through a few more job changes and an occasional overseas posting, and Brown once again landed in Northeast Florida and as the head of Web.com.

The company reported nearly \$106 million in total revenues for the third quarter of 2012, ending September 30. That figure is more than double the \$43.9 million in revenue reported for the same period in 2011. In addition, Web.com's customer base jumped to approximately 3 million subscribers over that time, an increase of some 18,000 from the end of the second quarter on June 30.

Those numbers have not gone unnoticed. In November, Web.com Group Inc. earned a place on Deloitte's Technology Fast 500, an annual ranking of the 500 fastest-growing technology, media, telecommunications, life sciences and clean technology companies in North America. It's a tough group to break into, let alone outshine or beat in the open marketplace. But Brown's vision of a company that provides small businesses a one-stop for online services—domain registration, website development, marketing, lead generation, eCommerce, social media and mobile applications—has helped push the firm to be an industry leader.



## THAT'S NO SMALL FEAT IN AN INDUSTRY KNOWN FOR RAPID-FIRE GROWTH

and head-spinning, business-altering innovations. However, Brown and the Web.com crew aren't out to create the next big thing like a Facebook, PayPal or Words With Friends. Instead, they are content to let others change the Internet landscape. Their role is to get the average Joe small businessperson to better utilize the new tools that are out there.

The Web.com campus is no Silicon Valley dream factory. On the contrary, the company headquarters building is about as visually pleasing as the cardboard box in which your last PC was packaged and shipped.

A new customer is guided by a start-to-finish team of specialists, each individual focused on his or her area of expertise. One person will have an initial consultation with the client, another writes website copy, another designs the website, another fields questions and makes suggestions. The result should be a fully functioning website in about a week's time.

904 Magazine recently sat down with Brown at the Web.com headquarters to discuss his background, business experience and how he met his wife. Here's some of what he told us.

### First job?

Mowing yards, when I was in sixth and seventh grade. And then a bag boy. Then I worked in a bank [First National Beach Bank] while I was in high school. I used to go in after hours—I'd ride my bike a couple miles from Fletcher to the bank—and I posted the liability ledger and general ledger when all the other employees were gone. It was not computerized back then. I did that every day through high school.

### Worst job?

I hate to say it but I can't recall a bad job I ever had. Maybe changing diapers?

### Business mentors you had when you were younger?

I had several when I was a young employee. Perhaps one I would point out is Roger Wiegman. He was the president of Barnett Computing Company when I started. Phenomenal person, great character, very patient, great leader, very direct—I didn't really get much of what he was teaching me at the time when I was working with him. I only got it a few years later. He used to bust my chops all the time about how arrogant I was. I think at the time I thought "he just doesn't know." But now I look back at how helpful he had been. And some of those "busts" kept me on the right path. He also saw in me an inability to stay in one place for very long, so he moved me from job to job every few years which gave me a phenomenal opportunity to get to do a lot of different things.

There were others. There's a fellow at Florida National Bank that I worked for, Charlie Hoskins, who was a wonderful man in terms of his personality and character. Very fun guy to work with. I still have folks here that I get a lot from. Roseann Duran [chief people officer] is a wonderful spirit. I have a wonderful CFO [Kevin Carney]. There are lots of terrific people that I'm surrounded with, who are younger than me, but that I pick up something from all the time.

### Hardest business lesson ever learned?

Not to look forward too far, to stay cemented in the present. It's a blessing I still struggle with, spending too much time looking where I am going and not enjoying where I am. I was especially troubled with it when I was younger. I have less trouble now because I have so much distance that I can look backward.

There have been lots of little tactical things along the way. A year-long assignment in Italy trying to get a deal done in the Italian system; that was a frustrating experience. Working in France, that's like getting your teeth drilled. Working in Saudi Arabia is equally frustrating. Those are all things that toughened me up for my current job.

### How do you measure personal success in your job, beyond stock price?

I don't even measure the stock price, to be frank with you. My measure

of success is more internally generated—how focused I am and how hard I'm trying to do what I believe in. That's really the only measure. I've learned the hard way that if you measure anything else you will be very disappointed.

### Favorite Harvard memory?

I have lots of them. I managed the tennis courts while I was there. So, I have lots of good memories of that, watching the young coeds play tennis (laughs). But, truthfully, when you move from Florida to Harvard and you are basically considered a country bumpkin, it's hard. Really, really hard, especially when you are going to school with people who have all graduated from prep schools and they are basically already



**Phone //** iPhone

**Mac or PC //** Both

**iPod Playlist //** Extremely eclectic, from Enya to hard rock, books on tape.

**Facebook //** No. No Twitter account. I enjoy living through others vicariously.

**Blogs Regularly Read //** Too many to even recount. I use blogs heavily to keep track of folks.

**Last Business Book Read //** Not a big business book reader. Last would be Gary Chartrand's book [*Unreasonable Leadership*]

**Vacation Destination of Choice //** Highlands, North Carolina. And the rest of the world. I travel a lot for vacation.

**Unhealthy Habits //** Don't work out enough. Drink too many Diet Cokes.

**A Fan Of //** Golf. But all the sports.

# RIGHT ON COURSE

**IN JUNE OF THIS YEAR**, it was announced that the PGA Tour and Web.com had signed a 10-year agreement that named the Internet service provider the umbrella sponsor for the newly named Web.com Tour. Formerly the Nationwide Tour, the new pro golf tournament association will continue to glean and transition players who are ready to compete on the PGA Tour's big-league stages.

The new sponsorship is desirable for Web.com for several reasons. First, CEO David Brown is a golf fan (his son was an all-American player at UNF).

Also, as the umbrella sponsor of the Tour, Web.com will garner media coverage throughout the year and international television exposure through Golf Channel's live telecasts of tournaments and ancillary programming. It was also receive branding and promotion at more than two dozen tournament sites via a series of Small Business Forums.

The morning forums are intended to help local small business owners identify an online strategy that integrates web presence, SEO, social media and mobile options that don't require big business budgets. Specifically, forum participants will be asked a series of

questions such as:

What are the most important elements of a great website?

How can I gauge whether my website is working for me?

What is the best way to increase traffic to my website, and ultimately my business?

What does it take to efficiently market on Google, Facebook and Twitter?

Of course, the company hopes many in attendance will consider Web.com's services to implement the answers to these and other business questions.

done with their first two years when you show up. My best day was when the dean told me I was off the warning list, and that I was going to make it there. That was during my freshman year.

#### **Fondest memory working at Barnett Bank?**

Meeting my wife there.

#### **How did you meet her?**

I hired her (laughs). She was interviewing for a job and the guy who was supposed to hire her was out that day. So, I interviewed her and hired her. Not that many weeks later I found her a job at another bank so we could start dating.

#### **Your business could be based anywhere. What are some of the advantages to being based in Jacksonville?**

The most important one for me was this was my hometown and I didn't want to move again... It turns out that the employee base is perfect for our business. Jacksonville is one of the regions of the country where day-in and day-out people care about other people. They are not so self-absorbed and so stressed out that they can't carry on a conversation and have good intentions to help. We're a service company. We're here to serve small businesses. So, having employees that have a focus on other people is of critical importance.

We could also be Iowa, and there are other places where this could work. Halifax, Nova Scotia and Spokane, Washington—we have offices there that work well. But Jacksonville is the perfect place for the hundreds of people we hire here.

#### **This is a very labor-intensive business. That would probably surprise many people.**

It's by design. The two things I set about when we started the company were: to help small businesses; and to have a people-intensive business where we could help the people who came to work here achieve their potential. We were not trying to eliminate people with technology. We were trying to use technology to make them more capable. It's perfect for young people because they are very technology-oriented. Pairing up young people with technology so that they can achieve their potential, they find out how good a writer they are or how good they are with people or how good a salesperson they are, maybe for the first time in their life.

That was a good reason to start a company. It doesn't hurt that small businesses want to talk to people. They don't want to talk to computers. We have stayed true to that and we have been fortunate to be able to keep it all on-shore.

#### **But a company like this could have a large off-shore presence.**

We certainly could. And we could probably save a few dimes. But we would give up in the quality of the work we provide our customers.

#### **What was the spark that led you to start your own business?**

My wife has been on me since we got married to start my own business. She has been my biggest fan. It dawned on me that I wasn't creative enough or lucky enough to come up with an idea. Don't get me wrong, I tried. I would strain all the time trying to come up with an idea but nothing ever came of it, so I became a corporate executive. I was fortunate to have enough success that I retired. Turned out retirement wasn't for me.

So, this is more of a question, "What would you do if you could do whatever you wanted to do?" In my case, I wanted to do something really hard—and that is helping small businesses. There isn't anything I have found that's harder than helping small businesses navigate the Internet. And it's not because of them, it's because they are busy, have full-time jobs, and this is the last thing on their lists of things to worry about. You have to crack through that.

If not this, I would have been a teacher. We teach here. We teach young people, we teach each other. This is nothing if not a teaching environment. So, those two things married up together and it's what you do when you are too young to retire, or don't want to.

#### **Biggest challenges faced in your industry?**

The hardest thing about our business is how to connect with a small business without being right in front of them. It's not economical to have thousands of salespeople because you can't charge enough for the service. So you have to find a way to connect using the Internet or a phone or some alternative means, and in a risk-averse environment that's very difficult. I'd say that's our biggest challenge.

We are trying to do that better now by our sponsorships, our advertising. We are actually putting some resources in the field in local markets. Those are some of the reasons the company is growing and is successful right now.

#### **So why will your firm succeed?**

Because our employees genuinely care about our customers.

#### **Most business websites fail how? What are they doing wrong?**

The websites themselves might be fine but they fail because customers can't find them. Being found is the most important thing of all.

#### **Predictions for business in the coming year?**

I've learned never to make predictions. ■