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VIRTUAL, REAL WORLDS UNITE

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It's after 9 p.m. on a winter Wednesday, and the Boston Bellydance Meetup is just getting underway. Ten people sit around a long table at the Middle East Restaurant in Cambridge wrestling with a tricky problem: how to transport a sword through US airports.

Vanessa Naja, a belly dancer newly arrived from Los Angeles, balances her sword on her head and hip during some performances. But she had to leave it back home in southern California, she complains, because she couldn't fit it in her suitcase. Another transplant, Mitara Koyla of Huntsville, Ala., offers a solution. "Check it in a gun bag," she advised. "No problem."

Many of the belly dancers, who linked up over the Internet, have never before met in person. Their assembly makes them part of the hottest new trend among tech-savvy young professionals: meetups. Enabled by the New York technology company Meetup.com, they are this year's Friendster for the networking set. More than 2 million people have registered for meetups somewhere in the world. In the Boston area, in January alone, there were meetups for pug owners, scrapbookers, stay-at-home moms, vegans, anarchists, and dozens of other groups.

"This is a way to communicate," said Seyyide Sultan, a biochemistry researcher who organized the belly dance meetup.

Started in 2002 by a trio of Internet entrepreneurs and computer geeks, Meetup.com was animated by the concept of "find the others," a utopian mantra ascribed to one-time Harvard University psychologist Timothy Leary. The company stumbled into the spotlight last year, when its technology became a central tool in the early success of former Vermont governor Howard Dean's presidential campaign. But since then it's been adopted by thousands of other groups the conservative Heritage Foundation promoting social security reform, executives of Red Hat Inc. evangelizing open-source software, and television cultists rhapsodizing over "Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

The irony of using Internet technology for something as prosaic as old-fashioned meetings is not lost on Scott Heiferman, the 32-year-old Meetup.com chief executive and one of its founders.

"People said the Internet would be a global village and the death of distance," said Heiferman, a University of Iowa graduate and former online advertising executive who said he started Meetup.com to build on the sense of community he saw in New York after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. "But at the end of the day, people get something out of face to face. We're using the Internet to get people off the Internet."

Heiferman estimated the company has 1.6 million active members people who regularly attend meetups. That's up 60 percent from a year ago, and Meetup.com membership has continued to climb since the election and its use by Dean's forces. The growth occurs even as Friendster, a once-hot social networking site with which Meetup.com is sometimes compared, struggles with executive departures and flashier competitors like MySpace. Executives at Meetup.com, organized more around interests than connections, consider themselves in a different category of business, one that mixes virtual and real-world networking.

Meetup.com was funded initially by angel investors like Esther Dyson and later by venture capitalists like Draper Fisher Jurvetson in Silicon Valley. It makes its money primarily by charging \$5 a month for "premium accounts" that let meetup members e-mail each other, view enhanced profiles, and upload photos of meetup events. Though its business model will change, Heiferman insisted that Meetup.com will never sell its e-mail lists to vendors without the consent of members.

Next up for the company may be a push to link local meetups into national organizations that could pool resources and lobby for public policy. "We're really focused on how . . . these groups in different cities,

who are meeting up about the same thing, join forces and become a network," Heiferman said. "It's the next generation of associations."

Meetup.com got a boost last month when former senator Bill Bradley, Democrat of New Jersey, joined its board of directors. "It's a great example of something in the private sector helping to meet a social need and a yearning that's out there," Bradley said in an interview, recalling he had spoken and written in the 1990s about the decline of community in America and the importance of restoring civic society.

Bradley, like Heiferman, was influenced by "Bowling Alone," the 2000 book by Harvard public policy professor Robert D. Putnam about the collapse and revival of American community. To help mend the rift between red and blue states, Bradley took part in a bipartisan bowling event last October called the Great American Meetup Bowl-Off.

Putnam, who sits on a Meetup.com advisory board, said the company's toughest challenge will be to keep the meetup groups going after the initial excitement of connecting via the Internet dies down.

"To make the meetups sustainable, people will have to use many of the same techniques that the Kiwanis Club did," Putnam said. "Someone's going to have to get on the phone, and someone's going to have to bake the cookies. The Internet won't bake the cookies."

Despite the involvement of Bradley and the celebration of Meetup.com as the platform of choice for Internet politics, Heiferman said that he and fellow founders Matt Meeker and Peter Kamali never envisioned politics as a major application for their technology. "We're not very political people," he said.

The founders initially thought their technology would be popular with musicians or fans of certain bands, but that didn't pan out. "It turns out there wasn't that much for them to talk about," Heiferman said. Instead, meetups caught on among groups like foreign language speakers, pet owners, knitters, and political activists though politics represents just 10 to 15 percent of all meetups. The only categories banned from organizing with the meetup technology are hate groups and so-called "adult" groups.

On the same night as the belly dance meetup, across the Charles River, seven people gathered upstairs in the Virgin Megastore cafe for the Boston Wi-Fi Meetup Group. High on their agenda: the scourge of "wireless hogs." Meetup organizer Susan **Kaup** reported spotting a freebooter with a laptop computer nursing a cup of coffee for hours at True Grounds in Somerville, a free wireless Internet hotspot. "They're giving us a bad name," lamented Pat McCormick, a student at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

Talk centered on creating etiquette rules for Wi-Fi users and posting them at coffee houses and other wireless hotspots in the Boston area. Among the ideas brainstormed were admonitions to tip generously and purchase something every time you ask for the bathroom key.

There is also the social networking aspect of a meetup. Doug Brander, a Hull electrician, said he was nervous ahead of his first Wi-Fi meetup because he feared many in the group were into "wardriving," the practice of tapping into unprotected wireless networks. "Personally I have no interest of hacking into someone else's network. I just want access," he said.

For the belly dancers, some of whom were new to Boston, the meetup was a chance to make some friends. They sipped red wine, nibbled on pita bread and hummus, and listened to Arabic music while discussing the latest trends in dancing, such as "fusion" style combining belly dancing, hip hop, flamenco, and Afro-Caribbean dance forms.

"I want to meet people," said Naja, who dances under the stage name of Freyja and moved to Boston because her boyfriend is a graduate student at Harvard. "I have no girlfriends here."

As the night grew long, and the sounds of the oud, the tambourine, and the darbuka grew loud, the belly dancers rose from their seats, fastened coin belts around their waists, and began swaying to the music. Some of the late-night diners at the Middle East paused to snap photos with their cellphone cameras. The dancers lifted their voices in a zaghareet, a call of celebration, as another meetup wound down.

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SIDEBAR 1:

AREA MEETUPS

Meetup.com lists 21,890 members and 1,481 meetup groups in the Boston area, making it the ninth-largest center for meetups in the United States. These are some of the most popular nonpolitical meetup topics in Greater Boston:

Topics Groups

Investors Business Daily 84

Witches 63

Spanish 40

Knitting 39

French 38

Pug 37

Newly single 33

Pagan 28

German 27

Atheists 25

Japanese 23

Stay-at-home moms 23

Italian 21

Source: Meetup.com

SIDEBAR 2:

MEETING UP

Meetup.com has spawned tens of thousands of gatherings around the globe. Here are some meetup topics:

Hillary Clinton supporters 15 meetup groups 174 members

New England Patriot fans 23 meetup groups 210 members

Avril Lavigne fans 90 meetup groups 806 members

Macintosh computer users 205 meetup groups 2,296 members

Portuguese language speakers 214 meetup groups 3,988 members

Bill O'Reilly fans 279 meetup groups 5,560 members

Webloggers 300 meetup groups 6,425 members

Elvis Presley fans 355 meetup groups 5,675 members

Pug owners 419 meetup groups 10,191 members

Stay-at-home moms 735 meetup groups 13,264 members

Source: Meetup.com

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