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Glenn Oliver

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Glenn Oliver, president of H2bid.com (www.h2bid.com) in Detroit, has enjoyed success and growth since launching what can best be described as an information clearinghouse for water projects around the world. The online B2B marketplace pairs utilities seeking to complete projects such as system upgrades with vendors from a host of industries, including construction, consulting, legal, or public relations. Oliver says it's an honor to be selected as a Champion of the New Economy.

How did you get started? I was a member of the Detroit Board of Water Commissioners in the late 1990s (1998-2002) and it dawned on me that with the advent of the Internet, there must be a better way to connect vendors and utilities online. After I left the board, I did some research to see if any company had been started in this field, and none had. So I went about setting plans to start a company. Prior to joining the water board, I was a member of Mayor Dennis Archer's executive staff. It was Archer who appointed me to the water board. Before that, I was working in the legal industry in private practice from 1988 to 1996. I knew Archer for quite some time. After I graduated from the University of Michigan Law School, he hired me as a clerk when he was a Supreme Court Justice. Then I went to Minneapolis and worked in private practice, and I was returning to Detroit to start a law firm when Mayor [Dennis] Archer called. Today, I operate the Glenn Oliver Law Firm in Detroit, which specializes in civil litigation. I grew up around the country as a military brat, and wound up graduating from Muskegon High School. From there, I graduated from the James Madison College at Michigan State University, and then off to U-M Law School.

How much traffic is the site generating? We launched the site in January 2006, and the traffic has been growing. I give the analogy that it's like making a car. It's a long-term process, as opposed to assembling a paper notebook. To make a car, you have to figure out how to make the brakes, the tail lights, the engine, so it's not easy. We get 15,000 hits a month, and in the future, we will be able to track the eventual bid winners. Right now, it's a one-way site, and we're working to make it a two-way site. Today, if you want to respond to those RFPs, it's by hard copy. We want the bidder to submit their bids and the utilities to announce the winners online through H2bid. We expect to have that ready in the first quarter of 2010.

What are some lessons learned from your launch? Just because it's an Internet business doesn't mean it's easy. It's still a lot of work. At any given time, we have 15 to 20 people working on the site. The way it works is that a utility gives us the information, or we acquire the information, or some utilities post it themselves. Some will send e-mails with the information, and some will mail it to us. One of our big claims to fame is that we offer the largest database of opportunities to conduct business with water/wastewater utilities around the world. Our volume of bid opportunities is unrivaled. The Internet is rapidly changing, and you have to attend to the business daily. It's like you're in school all the time.

Any other new endeavors under way? We have a site called www.h2find.com that we recently completed that will help facilitate partnership relationships between contractors and subcontractors. There's also an online bank if vendors need commercial financing or gap financing, which is called www.h2bidfinance.com. We have another service we're developing — we're partnering with a search-engine marketing company to provide services to businesses in the water industry and those focusing on B2B, which is called www.h2sem.com. And we're in discussions with a company that does online auctions for companies. With electricity deregulation, we want to auction the purchase of energy. In essence, we'll be able to work with water utilities to conduct power auctions so that they get best price for electricity. Since we're in Michigan, we've developed a special page for Michigan bids, called www.h2michigan.com.

What advice can you offer to other entrepreneurs? There's nothing to fear but fear itself. In Michigan, we need more people who are willing to take the leap and start a business. It's not easy, but there's no greater reward in the business world than having your own business. But there's no greater challenge, either. If we're going to change Michigan, we need more people to become entrepreneurs. If you have an idea, do your research — if it proves to be true, then go for it. There's a lot of planning and thinking before jumping out, and every business will have its share of challenges that you didn't anticipate. Be prepared to stick it out through the hard times. We have a great blog (www.h2bidblog.com) and we have a great writer who researches the energy markets and new inventions. There are some very real challenges in providing clean drinking water around the world. We just finished a custom search engine that's all about the water industry. We work with a tool that Google provides, and it's a great research site called www.h2seek.com. We're also working on an online catalog for water utility vendors called www.h2catalog.com. If a company needs research on a particular utility or issue, we can provide that through the site www.h2bidresearch.com. And we're working on www.h2bidauction.com, which will allow utilities and vendors to auction off excess inventory. As for other advice, I would encourage businesses to look at the water industry as an opportunity to diversify. A lot of people don't think about the water industry, but there are a lot of opportunities. The industry needs security, public relations, construction services, consulting services, [and] I.T. services. There are thousands of potential vendors out there and millions of dollars in services required. On www.h2bid.com, we have between 1,000 and 2,000 open contracts at any given time. Fundamentally, we make it easier for water utilities and vendors to do business with one another.

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