

Bend duo helps forge new model for tech industry

Agility, collaboration at core of startup

By David Holley / *The Bulletin*

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From mobile app developers to Internet marketing masters, the number of technologically savvy professionals is rising in Central Oregon.

Through a business called Code Benders, Michael Taus and Matthew Kern blend the spectrum of those tech-based services:

- They perform software development, such as mobile or website applications.
- They do digital marketing through public relations and online advertising.
- And they do consulting and product incubation.

The pair do most of their customers' work on their own, with Taus helping the business development and marketing end and Kern heading the more technical aspects of



Tyler Roemer / The Bulletin

Michael Taus, left, and Matthew Kern, both of Bend, discuss Code Benders, the software development, consulting and marketing website they run, on Wednesday at Strictly Organic Coffee Co. in Bend. Taus, a co-founder of Rent.com, and Kern, who helped develop the platform for the Palm Pre, have extensive backgrounds in the tech industry.

programming. But they also work with other technophiles on a situational basis when the workload, or skill requirement, outmatches them.

“We tried to build this where people like us, who work independently, can still collaborate with other people,” Taus said.

More than anything, Code Benders is a byproduct of two men who have held long, notable careers in the technology industry.

After graduating from law school and a two-year stint as a legal counsel for a technology incubator, Taus, now 39, was one of the co-founders in 1999 of Rent.com, a popular rental property listing website with a national focus. He was the vice president of business development and general counsel before the website was sold to eBay.

Kern, 35, was one of the principal engineers who worked on the development of the platform for the Palm Pre, a smart phone that was released in 2009 by Palm, an early developer of personal digital assistant, or PDA, devices.

They aren't the only Central Oregon residents with high-profile backgrounds, or at least residents who are highly technologically knowledgeable. Bend, in fact, is somewhat of a hotbed for high-tech talent, Taus said.

Marshall Simmonds, The New York Times' chief search strategist, maintains a home in Bend. The area also boasts growing search engine optimization firms such as G5 Search Marketing and AudetteMedia.

Multiple mobile application developers live and work in the area. And one study from May said Bend had the fifth-highest market share of Apple iPad sales in the U.S.

Scott Larson, venture catalyst manager of Economic Development for Central Oregon, said groups like Code Benders and Central Oregon's Tech Alliance are perfect for connecting people with various technological talents who might need to work together on business projects.

“We've got to make sure that we know ... who are individuals to slot into these companies,” Larson said.

Finding a work force

Taus said many of the techies who live in Central Oregon are those with top-tier knowledge, and are people who, like he and Kern, will have ideas for tech company startups. After those companies get off the ground, however, Taus said there aren't enough people already living in Central Oregon with midlevel technology knowledge to work for those companies.

That's part of the reason he said he joined the newly formed Deschutes Economic Alliance, a group of business owners paying for an economic growth plan for Deschutes County. By working on a committee in the alliance that focuses on technology, Taus is trying to encourage efforts to increase the number of people with midlevel tech knowledge.

Code Benders also helps businesses develop that knowledge if it doesn't already exist. After Kern and Taus work on a project for a company — maybe by developing a website that sells a product or a system that allows the company to record data — Kern and Taus work with the company's employees to train them on maintaining the website or system.

“If we're doing our job right, we're building our way out of a job,” Kern said.

But they also advise business owners on products the businesses develop, and will sometimes try to develop business partnerships.

Taus and Kern relocated to Bend in the mid-2000s and met for the first time about two years ago. On paper, it seems they should have met in the early 1990s, when they both attended the University of the Pacific in California.

Kern, however, was working on his undergraduate degree at the university's Stockton campus, while Taus was a law student at Pacific's McGeorge School of Law in Sacramento.

Coincidentally, neither Kern nor Taus went to school for anything remotely based in technology. Kern majored in international environmental policy, while Taus' bachelor's degree was in psychology.

Both had tinkered with computer programming when they were younger, and grew more interested and involved as it became more readily available. After college, Kern was a recruiter for technical jobs.

“I basically decided the jobs I was giving away were more interesting than the job I had,” he said.

An agile approach

Code Benders isn't only about building for others — Taus and Kern hope to work on projects of their own, too. That's part of the benefit of making Code Benders a collaborative business.

With a built-up network of other professionals, such as experts in writing JavaScript or talented open source programming language writers, they can work on projects in which everyone contributes. That means that everyone would be a shareholder, too, Taus said.

“There's a few people doing something similar to this,” Kern said. “I don't think anyone has nailed it yet.”

Code Benders has already developed an online community for Taus' nonprofit organization, Unite Now, which promotes other nonprofits and socially conscious businesses. The online community, [www.unitenow](http://www.unitenow.in) .in, allows those groups to post pictures, event information and contact info, similar to a social networking site like Facebook.

And Taus and Kern built a website pro bono for Bend Community Supported Agriculture, a group that sells shares of locally grown produce, dairy, eggs and meat. Taus said he met the founders at a local store, where they were handing out pamphlets looking for a minimum of 25 people to buy shares so they could start the CSA.

Within a couple months, [www .bendcsa.com](http://www.bendcsa.com) had attracted 200 families, Taus said.

“These are a couple of college students who wanted to do the right thing for their community,” he said.

Those students could have started a website on their own, Taus said, but it would have likely followed a more antiquated method of Web development, which Code Benders has left behind. Taus and Kern use a method called Agile, by which they develop one step at a time and make changes as necessary, instead of spending months planning everything beforehand.

“If they would have (built their own website), they probably would have been riding around with bricks on their shoes,” Taus said.

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