



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

Spiritual support in a virtual community

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By Carolyn Y. Johnson, Globe Staff | July 30, 2007

CAMBRIDGE -- Praying wasn't a popularity contest. Until now.

Internet start-up PrayAbout.com marries the ultimate in user-generated content -- people's deepest prayers -- with the collective empathy of the crowd, in a variation on the social dynamics that have become common on secular sites.

"I was tired of seeing a video of a grandmother falling down or someone recommending a news story -- this is trying to add some real value to peoples' lives," said Rodger Desai, who helped develop PrayAbout.

"The point is that people can actually help each other and empower each other -- we have a lot more in common than we realize."

The website basically quantifies community prayer by allowing people to light virtual candles in support of personal pleas.

Users build a nondemoninational spiritual support network, posting sad stories of terminal illnesses, devastating pleas to save dying children, or the occasional mundane prayer that a son will get a driver's license.

Then, others write supportive messages, subscribe to one another's prayer requests, and -- when they want to pray with people -- light virtual candles that also catapult popular prayers to a higher spot on the homepage.

Unlike online social networks, which depend on friends for connections, PrayAbout's users are generally strangers, drawn together by shared hope.

"There is a core group that kind of latches onto you and vice versa -- a handful of people that respond to me personally all the time, every day or every other day," said Angie Rubin, who joined the site in May, after she learned that her older brother had been diagnosed with a rare form of cancer.

"You see their usernames and think, there she is again and she's really holding the high-watch, she's in for the long haul on this one," she said.

The website is the first venture from Notati, a start-up headed by Greg Gibson, the founder of Helium.com -- a website where people write articles about a wide range of topics that are rated by peers. Authors earn a share of the ad revenue that their articles help generate.

PrayAbout applies a similar model to prayer. People receive candles when their prayer requests spark a community response, or when they illuminate prayers that later become popular.

They can also buy candles (\$5 for 20) or get them by referring new members.

"I'm really interested in how communities organize information," said Gibson, who has prayed that stray cats find welcoming homes and that the world finds a solution to global warming.

But the economic forces that govern the lives of Internet start-ups are an odd fit with the charitable impulses of PrayAbout's users.

"This site is getting people to ferret out stuff that's interesting . . . it does have some very interesting social dynamics in it," said Judith Donath, director of the Sociable Media Group at the MIT Media Lab. "It also has a very interesting economy to it -- including that they're getting money off getting people to tell sad

stories and support sad stories."

The website does not run advertising, and "the capital that arises from something like this goes back to making the product better -- it's why we're OK having ads on Google searches -- because that money makes the search better," Desai said.

Ultimately, he said PrayAbout will probably allow a portion of a candle -- which can cost as much as 25 cents -- to be donated to a specific cause or organization, creating a new model for people to raise money.

Eventually text-message prayer alerts and more interactivity will be added, but already PrayAbout is thriving -- with more than 10,000 prayer requests posted since its launch in May.

"This site is such a blessing," wrote user BeckyMary. "Thank the Lord!"

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