

NETWORKS

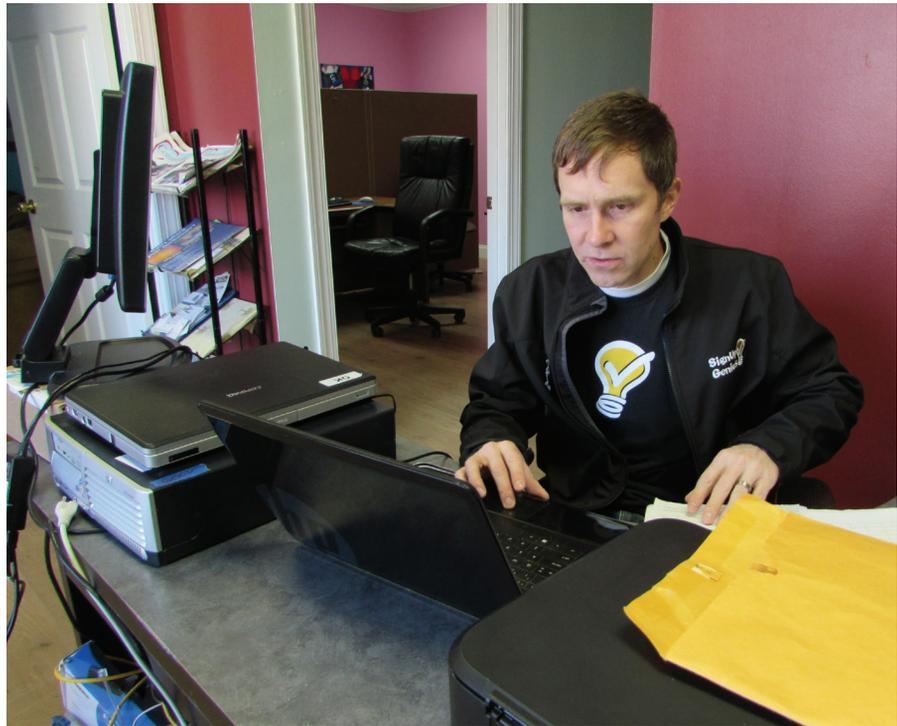
Organizing principal

A Charlotte techie creates a site that helps groups get their act together.

BY ALLISON FUTTERMAN

Dan Rutledge showed up at a church party in 2008 with snacks in hand, as people with last names starting with letters N to Z were asked to do, while those with last names from A to M were told to provide beverages. The loose planning flopped. “We all showed up and were shocked to find that every snack family brought chips and salsa and every drinks family brought Diet Coke,” he says. “It was the most disgusting party meal ever.” It also helped Rutledge spot a niche in helping small groups get better organized. He was then in charge of Web development at Charlotte-based Skylark Productions Inc., a former media-services company started by local tech entrepreneur Mike Vadini. Combining his Web skills and party experience, Rutledge helped start SignUpGenius.com, a website for managing volunteers and sign-up lists.

It has proven popular, especially for soccer and hockey moms, study groups and Scout troops. “We feel that if we keep the focus on the actual product, our users handle the bulk of the marketing for us,” says Rutledge, co-owner and CEO of SignUpGenius Inc. The Charlotte-based company estimates it had 39 million unique visitors to its website in 2014, up from about 98,000 in 2009. In November, it reached 880th on Alexa.com’s ranking of top U.S. websites, based on a study of three months of traffic. “From the beginning, growth of the site was viral and rapid,” Rutledge says. Most early users were women who used the site for school parties and family gather-



On Twitter, CEO Dan Rutledge calls himself a Jesus follower, tech nerd, smitten husband and NFL junkie.

ings. The website lets users create an event, invite others to participate, connect with volunteers by email and, of course, sign up to help — all for free. Revenue comes from ad sales. The company, which has 13 employees and doesn’t disclose finances, became profitable in late 2011 as larger groups took notice. The fire department in Maple Grove, Minn., uses SignUpGenius to manage training schedules, testing and standby lists for about 100 firefighters, says Tim Bush, assistant fire chief. The website expanded in February 2013 to offer more functions, such as collecting payments and creating volunteer-hours reports, for monthly subscriptions ranging from \$10 to \$50. “Since then, we’ve seen continual growth in the number of paid subscribers, with a 156% revenue increase between

October 2013 and October 2014,” Rutledge says. The company collects 2.1% plus a 20-cent transaction fee for each payment or donation made through the website. Revenue from the payments service was up 191% in October compared with a year earlier. More than 75,000 events are organized each month using the website.

Common Heart Inc., an Indian Trail food pantry, has used SignUpGenius for three years to recruit volunteers who collect food from grocery stores and to organize 150 drivers to deliver Thanksgiving turkeys, Executive Director Keith Adams says. That fits the company’s mission, says Angel Rutledge, Dan’s wife and the company’s chief operating officer, as a service “that simplifies life for people who are on world-changing missions.”