



GOOD NEIGHBORS: Internet service providers Matt Wade and Martha Huizenga are just a phone call away if you need them.

JOANNE S. LAWTON

Rooftop by rooftop

Capitol Hill couple build a hyperlocal Internet service provider business, taking on the big players by offering face-to-face customer attention

By Timothy Burn
Associate Editor

A decade ago, Matt Wade was having trouble getting someone on the phone to resolve recurring problems with his dial-up Internet service.

Wade had a background in telecommunications and computer consulting. So rather than just waiting on hold and hoping for the best, he set out to rig up his own dial-up Internet service.

"I started with Linux-based servers and set up a modem and started test-driving it," Wade says.

His system worked, and he shared it with a few friends, then a few more, and more. Before long, Wade realized his expanding network of newfound friends had become a strong customer base.

In the 10 years since, Wade's increasingly lucrative hobby has turned into D.C. Access LLC, a hyper-local wireless Internet service provider. Wade and his wife, Martha Huizenga, run D.C. Access out of their Capitol Hill townhouse. Wade is managing partner and CEO. Huizenga handles marketing and whatever else comes up. Their expanding base of paying customers stretches about as far as the eye can see from atop a seven-story apartment building around the corner on 12th Street SE.

Wade and Huizenga began the business as a sole

proprietorship in 1999. In 2004, one year after they began offering high-speed wireless to their customers, they formed D.C. Access into an LLC.

All along, Wade and Huizenga bootstrapped using their own finances; all profits were plowed back into the business. In 1999 and 2000, Wade was tempted to take on extensive financing and blow out the company as big as he could. Looking back at those early days, which coincided with the tech bubble, he is proud of his foresight.

D.C. Access serves residents and businesses of Capital Hill and, more recently, small pockets of Adams Morgan. That universe would seem to be fairly small in a world populated with telecom giants like Verizon Communications Inc. and Comcast Corp., but Wade and Huizenga say their neighborhood gives them plenty of room to grow.

"We have about 5,000 customers on Capitol Hill, which has about 25,000 homes. The rest of those homes are using the major ISPs," Huizenga says.

It really is a sort of David and Goliath story, though the final chapter has yet to be written. And rather than taking on those Goliaths with leather sling and rocks, Wade and Huizenga are coming at them house by house, rooftop by rooftop, plucking away customers one at a time.

D.C. Access offers wireless and Web hosting ser-

vice through a variety of plans. The wireless service costs \$29 to \$49 per month, and the Web hosting starts at \$10 per month.

The service is provided via an interlocking network of distribution locations and antennas placed on the roofs of the tallest buildings on Capitol Hill. To gain access to those roofs, Wade met landlords through the Capitol Hill Association of Merchants and Professionals and negotiated rights in exchange for a small portion of the monthly customer fees.

On the roof of the 12th Street building, Wade points out several gray antenna boxes arrayed in a variety of directions. A few point south toward Nationals Park and east toward Anacostia. Others point north and west toward Union Station. Each maintains a service radius of about one mile, thus nearly fully covering Capitol Hill. The antennas provide service to paying customers only.

So when one of their customers has a problem and calls D.C. Access, who picks up the phone?

"That would be myself or Matt," says Huizenga, adding that there is no D.C. Access call center and no computerized phone tree to bang through. When a service visit is needed, she or Wade hop in their "D.C. Access" emblazoned truck and zip over.

D.C. Access remains a small business, with about \$500,000 in revenue in 2009. The business has increased its revenue by 20 percent each year for the past three years. "Granted we started from a small amount of revenue," Huizenga laughs.

She and Wade have their sights set on growth opportunities, possibly in Anacostia. They say, though, their interest in providing service east of the river has much more to do with helping neighbors and closing the digital divide than becoming a vast Internet empire. "We started [this business] to help people, our neighbors," Wade says.

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Wade and Huizenga's takeaway: It is easy for business owners to get distracted and take a company in different directions. Stay focused on your customers and know that they are the lifeblood of your company.

Company: D.C. Access LLC

CEO: Matt Wade

Headquarters: Capitol Hill

What it does: Offers local high-speed wireless access and Web hosting to businesses and residents

Employees: Two, with a handful of part-time technicians

Revenue: **2009:** Approximately \$500,000, with a profit of 47 percent over the previous year.