

AMICUS CURIOUS

Group searches for new ideas

Local attorney travels with business folks to Israel to find 'the next Google'

BY MARY KATE MALONE
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Attorney Fredric D. Tannenbaum wants lawyers to look at their jobs differently.

"As a lawyer in 2012, people ask you and expect you to be more than just a lawyer," Tannenbaum said. "You're supposed to be a 360-degree provider of services — a person who can make a vast array of contacts and introductions and be knowledgeable about a lot of things."

With that goal in mind, the 52-year-old managing partner at Gould & Ratner LLP formed a group of lawyers and business people two years ago, called Acorn2Oaks (A2O), and headed to the Middle East.

Its goal? To find "the next Google" in Israel and help it grow, Tannenbaum said.

The group, made up of about 12 lawyers, entrepreneurs and investors, traveled to Tel Aviv in 2010 and 2011 to meet with Israeli start-up companies looking to expand in the U.S.

"If we think bigger, and think outside the box, we're not just lawyers — we're deal makers," Tannenbaum said he remembered thinking when he started the group in May 2010.

"If we get a group together ... We can go (to Israel) and be one-stop shopping for Israeli companies who someday, hopefully soon, want to come to the United States and will need a lawyer, an accountant, an investor."

A2O delegates met with the fledgling companies — what Tannenbaum calls "acorns" — to identify which ones could grow into "oaks."

The Acorn2Oaks participants spent about eight hours each day in

a Tel Aviv hotel conference room meeting with one Israeli entrepreneur after another.

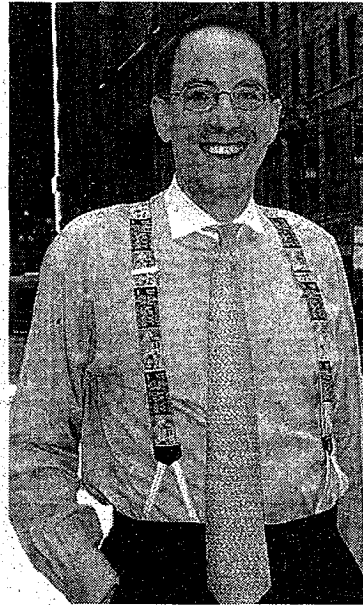
"It was incredible, it was like boot camp," Tannenbaum said. "It was hour after hour, of 12 of us sitting around a table, asking a bunch of questions and collecting notes. You can eliminate half of the people right away because it's much too early — they're not even acorns, they're a molecule of an acorn."

After both trips, the group met with a total of 50 different companies, Tannenbaum said, and selected some for investment and further exploration.

"I would hope more and more of the companies we've met ... will revolutionize the world. And if they don't, at least we've tried," Tannenbaum said. "It falls in the category of continuing to try — throw spaghetti on the wall and some of it sticks, some of it falls away."

The entrepreneurs themselves remained similar in their commitment and enthusiasm, said Adam J. Hecktman, director of the Microsoft Technology Center Chica-

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go, who attended the 2011 trip.

"The Israeli mindset is very rich with curiosity," Hecktman said. "Questioning is part of their culture, as well as creativity, rigor of analysis, acceptance of failure and the last one is stubbornness. ... It's a great for idea innovation and entrepreneurship."

One of the "acorn" companies, called SureVisit, offers the only automatic system to improve search engine optimization, Tannenbaum said.

Typically, a company hires a consultant to learn how to maximize the company's chances of appearing high in search engine results.

SureVisit offers that service embedded in a computer, constantly updating its optimization tips based on ever-changing search engine algorithms.

Tannenbaum helped SureVisit gain ground in the United States by connecting it with one of his clients, Answers Media LLC, a Chicago digital media company.

"AnswersMedia has led the relationship with SureVisit in sharpening their business strategy ... raising money and dramatically sharpening SureVisit's business plan," Tannenbaum said.

During the two trips, Tannenbaum served as a bridge between the Israeli entrepreneurs and the A2O members, Hecktman said.

"While I'm sitting there with my jaw wide open watching people present their ideas, I'm just blown away," Hecktman said. "Fred asked

all the right questions, he brought it down to, 'This is great, but what does it mean to an investor, or someone who wants to help you bring the idea out of Israel?' ... So while I'm sitting there dumbfounded, he's getting right to the heart of the matter."

Brian B. Gilbert, a partner at Gould & Ratner, attended both A2O trips. He looked for companies that could provide resources for his American clients who want to establish a foothold in Israel, he said.

Gilbert met his goal and connected one of his clients in the gaming industry with someone he met during one of the Acorn2Oaks trips.

"(My client) is using that person to establish a foothold in the Middle Eastern markets," Gilbert said.

If SureVisit does not represent the next Google, another company called Trendit just might, Tannenbaum said.

Trendit uses a GPS tracking device to count the number of people in a concentrated area and determine the group's demographics.

The service can prove useful for law enforcement, who might want to better understand the makeup of a crowd, Tannenbaum said, or for business owners looking to determine the demographics near a potential new store location.

The next Acorn2Oaks trip remains slated for 2013, Tannenbaum said. The group once considered going to different cities around the world, but decided Tel Aviv proved the most promising.

"We realize in order to create momentum and create buzz, you really have to focus and keep going back to the same place," Gilbert said. " ... You can't do it without being on the ground there. You have to be in front of people and make the personal contacts, and that's what creates opportunities."

Tannenbaum said he hopes his work with A2O broadens how his clients view him and attorneys in general.

"It changes the paradigm with the client," Tannenbaum said. "They see that this guy isn't just some garden variety lawyer with a legal pad crossing the T's and dotting the I's. He's trying to make things happen and think outside the box a bit and add more to the four corners of a legal document."

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