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## Web-based sales deliver for Home Office Solutions Group

By Andrew Chow Medill News Service  
Posted 7/7/2004

Sales at Marc Levin's online businesses just keep booming.

Revenues from Levin's Glenview-based Home Office Solutions Group totaled \$16.3 million in 2003 - an 81 percent increase from 2002.

Web-based sales accounted for 95 percent of the company's revenue last year.

"The Internet - I call it the Wild Wild West," Levin said during an interview at a warehouse off Dearlove Road. The warehouse stocks furniture sold through the company's three Web sites - HomeOfficeSolutions.com, ffficeDesigns.com and UltimateBackStore.com.

"There is no business model for us to follow ... so we create the business model, we create the ideas," said Levin, a New Trier High School graduate who holds a degree in hotel/restaurant management.

Levin's businesses, centering on what he calls "advanced ergonomic" office furniture - especially ergonomic chairs - are now the top retail Web sites for more than 20 different brands of upscale office chairs, most of which sell for more than \$400 a piece. Customers, driven to the sites by Internet search engines and word-of-mouth references, have placed orders from as far away as Taiwan and Kuwait.

It's a different world from the company's humble beginnings in 1995 as The Ultimate Backrub, a massage-therapy business that still operates from a storefront in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood.

As the Internet phenomenon emerged in the mid-1990s, some employees told Levin that clients were complaining about poor posture from hours spent "surfing" the World Wide Web. "I said, 'What's that?'" Levin recalled.

Then one weekend, the company - which in 1997 opened a second store in the Loop specializing in designer office chairs - delivered chairs to two prominent executives at their opulent North Shore homes.

Levin said he was astonished by the executives' makeshift home-office setups.

"Both of these guys had a Gateway computer, sitting on a door (laid across) two file cabinets," Levin said. "I asked each of them why they didn't have desks, and they said, 'My wife will not allow commercial office furniture in the home.' ... So that's when the light went on in my head, to get this home-office business started."

Home Office Solutions opened at 1498 Waukegan Road, Glenview, in 1998, showcasing designer home-office furniture. But it wasn't until Christmas 1999 that its new, Internet-based retail business began to pay off.

"We started to get a fair amount of orders, (and) people wanted the chairs immediately," Levin said. "There was no efficient way to ship a box containing a

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