Digital lives on a common floor

20th May, 2009   NT Balanarayan, Bangalore

Two years back, Sumit Jain, Lalit Mangal and Vikas Malpani, three techies, opted out of well-paying jobs and decided to chase their dream of entrepreneurship. When they look back now, they don't see a stash of cash but definitely a glimpse of it, and a better future.

The trio started a website called commonfloor.com to help people living in an apartment or housing society to network and work together for solving the issues they face.
The site, initially available only to Bangaloreans, has spread its roots to seven other cities in the last eight months.

The concept of the site has also evolved to offer a multitude of options for people living in a society, ranging from micro-local classifieds to chasing your interests.
They started off with the apartment they lived in. Soon, people wanted apartments they were staying in to be registered. Today, they have more than 3,000 apartments registered in the city and 10,000 around India.
The main problem, however, continues to be the same as it was when they started. "It is tough to get new people to use the site. Once they start using it, they persuade others

around them to try it," says Jain, adding, "But starting a word of mouth campaign is a challenge."

"The way people use the site also differs from city-to-city. For example, in Bangalore, everyone prefers e-mail as a mode of communication, but when we launched in Mumbai, the administrators informed us that it was tough to communicate with fellow residents via e-mail, as not everyone had one. So we added the SMS support. Now it takes just an SMS for the housing association members to inform residents of some upcoming event or a common problem," says Jain.

The site has been adding new features frequently, mostly on the basis of user requests. Mangal, an IIT alumnus, heads the development team, while Malpani handles the decisions on user interface. But according to Mangal, not all of these changes make it to the final site. "In the beginning, we used to add most of the feature requests, but now we are very choosy. Once we had introduced this feature through which people in a locality could share household items like chairs and tables at times like parties. The feature came from the users but was never used. So we decided to scrap it for good," he says.

User feedback was never a problem. Mitesh Raj, an association member at the Suncity apartment, is one such person. The 40-year-old is an administrator for the society, which boasts of 800 registered users right now.
"The site has helped us a lot. I have seen a lot of changes that have made it easier for us to contact all the members," Raj adds.

Growth, however, requires money – something the site is not getting a lot of. They are depending on a micro-local advertisement-based model to bring in the dough, but it may take more than that to publicise and expand the site.
People who start using the site have often requested the developers to add their city as well. Sumit Jain mentions a user who went to the US and requested them to add a support for the US cities as well. The trio, however, voted against it. They want to settle their house before they revolutionise the world.