

OFFICE & TECHNOLOGY**PROFILES IN
TECHNOLOGY**
Dan Cornell

SANDRA LOWE SANCHEZ / SAN ANTONIO BUSINESS JOURNAL

Remember those young kids right out of college that were at the forefront of the dot-com boom, started Internet companies, sold them and retired? Dan Cornell does. In fact, a decade ago he was one — or so he thought.

But when the stock he acquired in the sale of Atension (the firm he started when he was still in college) tanked, the cash he got from the deal didn't last long. "I got to hang out in Austin for six months," he says. "I like to call it my very expensive MBA."

Still, the experience offered more than just a lesson. "I was very proud for having built something at a very young age that somebody wanted to buy," he says.

It didn't take long for his phone to start ringing again, though, and Cornell and one of his partners with Atension, Sheridan Chambers, soon found work writing software applications for businesses' Web sites. In 2001, they started Denim Group. In 2004, the pair asked Internet security veteran John Dickson to join their firm. The goal: Help companies provide the more interactive Web applications customers were demanding, but also offer security as part of the package — preventing not only disruption but identity theft and privacy invasion as those applications gained usage.

Since Dickson joined, the trio have taken Denim Group from three to more than 50 people. Their work includes helping area school districts create the parent portals that help them track their children's grades.

Today, the firm is planning an Austin office as well as other endeavors resulting from demand growth in Internet applications and security.

Adding the security aspect to Web development has become a theme in Cornell's career. While there are many Internet security firms and software developers, few provide both services in one shop. "The interplay between these two service lines in business — this allows us to speak with a lot more authority," he says.

In 2004, Cornell took on another initiative that helps him speak with more authority: He started the San Antonio chapter of the Open Web Application Security Project — an international organization of Internet security professionals. Cornell still heads the chapter, which now has more than 20 members. Last fall, he became a charter member of OWASP's Global Membership Committee.

It was Cornell who headed up efforts by Denim Group in 2006 to develop an open source security tool for the Internet — software anyone could download to scan their Web sites for vulnerability. The firm released the tool, called sprajax, through OWASP. "The commercial tools capability-wise have since caught up and surpassed that, but when we released it, we certainly had a fairly unique approach and were out in front of what other folks were doing," Cornell says.

The development has created demand for Cornell to speak to groups all over the country and in Europe. Last year he spoke to 12 groups.

Most days, however, Denim Group's chief of technology comes to work in jeans and a casual shirt, rolls up his sleeves, and gets working on his computer. On one of those recent days, he spoke to Business Journal.

Company: Denim Group Ltd.

Title: Principal

Age: 32

Family: Wife, Lisa Moore Cornell

Education: B.S. in computer science, minor in mathematics, Trinity University, 1998

On growing up: I grew up in St. Louis, Mo., and both of my parents were accountants. I got my first computer when I was in 5th grade — a Tandy 1000 EX from Radio Shack. I was always using the computer, programming in BASIC. The family computer was always in my room.

I went St. Louis University High School. There was always a pipeline of guys that went to Trinity. The year I started, three in my class came down ...

When I came down to interview for a scholarship it was 20 degrees and sleeting in St. Louis and it was in the mid-80s here. I called home and said this is where I want to go.

On your career: I have always had an entrepreneurial streak. When I was in high school and college I ran a lawn service and a business building retail store fixtures. When it came time to look for a job after college I interviewed at a number of big firms and had several offers, but I knew I enjoyed starting and running my own companies and I figured that there was no better time than when I graduated from undergrad to start a company. I figured I was 22 and had no money and if things didn't work out I would be 23 or 24 with no money — no big deal.

I studied Computer Science at Trinity and before graduating I helped found a company called Atension along with Sheridan Chambers and another partner. We grew that company and sold it in September 1999 to a publicly traded firm called Rare Medium. The three originals ran the San Antonio office for a little over year before leaving Rare Medium.

Then I moved to Austin for a few months and didn't do anything. I read a lot and ran and worked out and just took a break after what had been a pretty hectic couple of years. I was trying to figure out what to do next and got to talking with Sheridan Chambers and I decided to move back to San Antonio to found Denim Group.

At the same time, we developed a technology that would look for trademark and copyright violations on the Internet, allow people to review them, and generate legal support documentation to enforce the rights. (That venture, Brand Defense, didn't take off after the pair could not get customers.) We were solving a problem that people didn't know they had, which meant they were going to have to take money and time they didn't have (to fix it).

On Denim Group: I'm one of three principals of Denim Group. John Dickson handles sales & marketing, Sheridan Chambers handles operations & financial and I am responsible for technology.

Denim Group is a fairly unique firm in that we do both software development and computer security work. There are a lot of software development firms and there are a lot of computer security firms, but it is rare to find firms (at least of our size) that do both.

I lead Denim Group in development of our technology — which includes development of services and products, technical training and development of those key staff members who really make us who we are. I also represent Denim Group to the international application security community (most specifically, OWASP).

On OWASP: I am very involved with the OWASP international conferences, and I am also a charter member of the newly formed Global Membership Committee. The purpose of the OWASP Global Committees is to focus on a key function within OWASP, such as projects, conferences, membership or industry outreach and coordinate OWASP member efforts in those areas. As OWASP has experienced incredible growth over the past couple of years it has become increasingly important to help ensure that contributors efforts are harnessed for maximum value and the Global Committees help with this.

Most influential trip: The trip to Portugal last November to attend the OWASP summit (at which the Global Committees were formed). There were 90 people from all over the world, leaders in the Web application and security community. The last day of the conference someone said "Hey are you coming to Africa with us?" We rented a van, drove through

Spain and took a ferry to Africa (Morocco).

Most innovative thing you've done in business: Started Denim Group. ... There are a lot of Internet security firms out there and there are a lot of software development firms around, but there are really not a lot of firms with the intersection of these skill sets, which is very unique, especially regionally ...

A lot of security firms are focused on breaking things ... and they're like, "Here's a list of all the exploits we found this year ...," whereas us, because we have a lot of business on the build side, we're using a different approach. We're looking at how do we build things from the outset so that we avoid introducing these defects that you're finding when you're doing these penetration tests and code reviews ... I think that makes it easier for us to communicate problems that we find to other development organizations.

Professional pet peeve: People who aren't trying to be part of the solution. Goal yet to be achieved: Create a world where software's actually trusted.

Fun fact: In 1999, Texas Monthly named (me and partner Chambers) to its list of "Multimedia Whizzes Under Thirty."

Line of work you would pursue if you couldn't work in technology: Construction. I used to work for a construction firm over summers in college. I really enjoyed the work but I wasn't as good at it as I was at technology and computers. Technology and computers also pays better.

Latest tech tool: iPhone, with a photo of my dog, Cody, a Newfoundland and Black Lab mix

What is there about you that people would be surprised to learn: I don't play video games that much.

Favorite hobbies: I read quite a bit because I find that it helps to expose me to new ideas and different ways of thinking about problems. I read a combination of business books, military history, technology and fiction.

Influential books: Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance; Rogue Warrior; Built to Last; Good to Great

PROFILES is a regular Special Report feature. For more info, contact **SANDRA LOWE SANCHEZ** at slowesanchez@bizjournals.com.