A niche social network for researchers
Commentary: A once-aspiring virologist has a pretty cool idea

By Therese Poletti, MarketWatch

SAN FRANCISCO (MarketWatch) -- Entrepreneur Ijad Madisch initially wanted to be a virologist and studied how to stop certain viruses in their path.

Now, the 29-year-old scientist, technologist and medical doctor is learning the positive aspects of possibly having a "viral" product on the Internet.

Madisch is the founder of a niche social network called ResearchGATE. It's like Facebook for researchers and scientists. And like Facebook, it has a clean look and it seems rather easy to use. It also mimics some of Facebook's successful features. Since May 2008, the very specialized site has grown to 250,000 registered users.

He launched the company in 2008 with an undisclosed amount of funding from an angel investor in Switzerland, Joachim Schoss and some professors and friends. Schoss is known for founding Scout24, an Internet auction site, and Myhandicap.com.

Madisch, who hails from Germany, got both his PhD and MD from the Medical School of Hannover. He got the idea for ResearchGATE when he saw a friend quoting his research on his Facebook profile, which seemed like an odd place to be talking about serious scientific research.

As a scientist who did his own research at Harvard University, also the stomping grounds of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, he realized there could be more information sharing among researchers in specific fields. Sharing scientific methods that don't work can also result in saving a lot of time, and can be done without disclosing too much about a particular proprietary project.

"We waste a lot of time and money in research," Madisch said. "Only the positive things are published. You don't publish what did not work."

He said that now, scientists are posting requests for help on certain problems daily on ResearchGATE. They can also find published literature quickly in their specific fields through a literature section. And like Facebook, you can see what papers or journals your researcher "friends" are reading. A status update feature is in the works, he said.

The site also has a closed element as well, a quasi-research intranet for institutions or companies that want to stay within their own walls. ResearchGATE manages and administers those networks, but the companies or universities host their secure data themselves.

David Bader, a professor of computational science and engineering at Georgia Institute of Technology, said there are many new ways for researchers to virtually collaborate. He has not signed up for ResearchGATE yet.
"I do participate with a number of research groups, but we often collaborate through private tools such as our own Wikis, and shared documents through GoogleDocs," he said. Other tools for finding similar research, he said include Google Inc.'s (NASDAQ:GOOG) main search engine and Google Scholar. "ResearchGate does offer a fantastic experience tailored towards the research community," he added in an email.

Madisch said the company is already generating some revenue. "We have several ways to make money without annoying the community," he said. One is by posting jobs on a job board, where only companies are charged for placing a job. Currently, there are 1,102 jobs posted on ResearchGATE.

Another revenue generator is through the managing of social networks for institutions. He hopes the Cambridge, Mass.-based company, which is very lean and currently employs 25 staffers, will be profitable sometime this year.

Since its launch in 2008, the company, like Facebook, relied on feedback from its users and tried to morph along with demands and needs of its users.

When asked if the site was in beta at launch, Madisch said, "Maybe it was even alpha."

Rivals have also been cropping up. The Nature Publishing Group, publishers of the well-regarded journal Nature, started Nature Network in 2007, a professional networking site for scientists. There are also a few others, including Academia.edu, which tries to answer the question, "who's researching what" and also has many elements of Facebook.

Madisch hopes to differentiate itself by offering diverse arenas of research clusters. The site has a wide range of research topics, from agricultural science, earth science, and geography science, to the most popular categories of biological sciences, computer sciences and health sciences.

It will be interesting to see if these niche social networks can be sustainable businesses on their own, or if they will need to become a part of a larger business. Madish believes if his young company can get profitable, it can stand alone. He hopes ResarchGATE will ultimately have a broader impact on science, and help researchers get results faster.