

ARIZONA BUSINESS GAZETTE

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The Business Resource • abgnews.com

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2017

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CHERYL EVANS/THE REPUBLIC

Rami Kalla (center) owns Point in Time Studios, a video-production company. Kalla is with his team: Audrey Pepe, production manager (clockwise from left); Brendon Boutin, video editor; Tyler Higgins, cinematographer and animator; and Kyle Schlosser, 3-D animator.

Video comes alive at Point in Time Studios

GEORGANN YARA
SPECIAL TO THE ABG

His dad bought the big bulky video camera and planned to capture family events with it.

But it didn't take long for Rami Kalla to take over the job even though he was only in elementary school.

"I just gravitated toward it. It was his camera, I just took it," said Kalla, the owner and founder of Point in Time Studios. "I just fell in love with it."

Besides his father losing his job as family videographer, there were other casualties. Kalla was 12, and one of his first short films was a horror flick in which his sister, then 6, was killed on screen, with fake blood and the works. There would be many others, as the native Tempean became known as the neighborhood's Steven Spielberg.

"Kids at school wanted to come to my house to make movies," Kalla said. "I had none of the new fancy technology stuff. No computers to edit (the films). It took hours to do what takes minutes now."

But Kalla didn't mind. He found his father's old 8MM films that featured footage from the 60s. Kalla then moved on from taping original action

Point in Time Studios

Where: 21 E. 6th St., Suite 610, Tempe

Employees: 15

Interesting stat: Seventy-seven percent of small businesses rely on personal savings for initial funds, according to a Wells Fargo/Gallup survey.

Details: 480-237-1267, pointintimestudios.com.

shots to splicing footage and transferring them to VHS tape.

In 2003, he left a stable corporate job to open his Tempe-based studio. What began as a one-man show doing a few projects at a time has grown into a staff of 15 that works an average of 10-20 projects at any time, Kalla said. Over the last 14 years, Point in Time has grown an average of 25 percent each year and is on track to grow 70 percent this year.

Kalla's clients run the gamut from small businesses to corporations like Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Ford. Years ago, he filmed a local event with an up-and-coming country singer Taylor Swift and has worked on a docu-

mentary with Hollywood filmmaker Jim Abrahams. Point in Time's clients are located across the country and in Germany and China.

Services range from conceptual design and art production to video marketing and 3D animation. The new virtual reality services have generated a lot of new business, he said.

The new VR facet is one that Alex Abernathy and his team at Asset Campus Housing, a Houston-based student housing property management company, are excited about.

Point in Time does lifestyle videos, virtual tour production and animation that bring to life the vision of Asset's new housing in early stages. Abernathy said he appreciates Kalla and his staff always looking for the next and newest innovating way that best serves Asset.

"Rami's a great guy. I enjoy working with business owners that have the mentality that they're here to do a job for you and want to get to know you as well," he said. "There are companies that are just willing to go the extra mile and Rami is ahead of that curve."

Growing up, Kalla dreamed of be-

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Fewer Arizonans sign up for 'Obamacare'

KEN ALLTUCKER
SPECIAL FOR THE ABG

The number of Arizonans who signed up for Affordable Care Act health insurance dropped by 3 percent this year, according to preliminary figures released Friday.

A total of 196,231 Arizona residents signed up or were automatically re-enrolled in a Healthcare.gov plan as of Tuesday's deadline. That is nearly 7,000 fewer sign-ups than one year ago, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Arizona sign-ups through the holidays were ahead of the last enrollment season even though consumers had fewer options and more expensive plans, so the final enrollment report suggests sign-ups slowed substantially in late January.

On Inauguration Day, President Donald Trump issued an executive order that directed government agencies to "ease the burden" of the Affordable Care Act, also known as "Obamacare," and his administration later ordered the cancellation of ads and outreach efforts encouraging sign-ups, a decision that later was reversed.

Still, local outreach groups said they worked hard in the final days of enrollment to reach people eligible for coverage.

Nationwide, 9.2 million consumers selected plans on the federal marketplace, a 4 percent drop from the year before.

"Arizona outperformed the nation as a whole," said Allen Gjersvig, director of navigator and enrollment services at the Arizona Alliance for Community Health Centers. "The effort was there by the assister organiza-

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THINKSTOCK

The Arizona Department of Revenue says some people might have to amend returns.

Department finishes fix of 1099-G tax form glitch

RUSS WILES
SPECIAL FOR THE ABG

The Arizona Department of Revenue said it has finished printing 580,000 corrected state-tax forms and had the documents in the mail starting Monday.

The department determined that it needed to reprint 1099-G forms listing the size of Arizona refund amounts after it determined that an earlier batch of mailings listed taxpayers' refunds for 2014 rather than for the correct year, 2015. The error cost the department about \$19,000 in additional printing costs plus postage expenses that haven't yet been determined, said spokesman Ed Greenberg. The department spotted the errors Jan. 30 and fin-

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APS saved customers \$6M in new power-trading arrangement

RYAN RANDAZZO
SPECIAL FOR THE ABG

Arizona Public Service Co. said its customers are saving about \$2 million a month because of the utility's participation in a California program that helps run power plants more efficiently.

APS joined the Energy Imbalance Market last year, and figures from the California Independent System Operator show that from October to December, the utility saved about \$6 million.

The savings are made because by participating in the market, APS was able to tap into available power supplies more efficiently than through its own hour-to-hour power trading. The market, run by the California ISO, seeks the most efficient, cost-effective power



TOM TINGLE/THE REPUBLIC

This is a ground-level view of the Arizona Public Service West Phoenix Power Plant. APS generates much of its own power, but it also purchases power from others.

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Vol. 137, No. 6
Established 1880



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Entrepreneurs

Best Business

DANIEL KEHRER

How to rank in Google local '3-Pack' listings



Until about a year ago, when someone searched online for a local business, Google delivered a "Local Pack" of seven organic (unpaid) results. Such featured listings are a visibility goldmine for local companies.

But in an effort to make results easier to digest on mobile devices, Google reduced the seven-pack to a three-pack — also called a "snack pack." This shunts millions of small businesses to the search-results hinterlands. And room at the top could be further squeezed if Google makes one of the top spots a paid position.

If your business has slipped out of the top local listings — or was never there in the first place — don't worry, because these are organic, not paid listings, small businesses can earn their way into the spotlight in a variety of ways, notes Manta, a leading online resource for small business.

Here are five things you can do to work your way into the top spots, suggested by Manta and other local search experts:

1. First, claim or create your Google listing. To create a new listing, go to google.com/business and click the green "Start Now" button. Fill in the basic information about your business and make

Don't expect a free Google listing to be your entire marketing effort. To gain more traction it's important to use a mix of local search, a strong, mobile-optimized website, and other locally focused marketing campaigns.

sure it's all correct. Google will send you a verification code, either by phone, email or physical mail (most common). You'll need to enter this code to make your listing go live.

If Google already lists your business — but you haven't officially "claimed" that listing, you will need to do so. Just find the existing listing, click the "Own this Business?" link and follow the prompts to complete the same process above.

2. Once your listing is verified, build out your profile. You can do this at Google My Business (google.com/business), a free portal where business owners can edit and enhance their Google listings.

Small details count. For example, it's vital that your business name, address and phone number in Google exactly match the same information on your website, and in the same order. As Manta notes, even small differences can hurt your search-result placement.

And make sure your hours of opera-

tion are listed clearly and accurately. Business hours are one of the first things customers search for, and Google takes this into account in ranking your business. Adding photos of your business lends credibility and can also improve your search ranking.

3. Encourage and manage reviews. Like photos, reviews can give your business a competitive edge in search. According to SEO experts at Manta, reviews serve a dual purpose with Google. They offer prospects a way to gauge your business, and they also provide Google with a ranking signal. In short, businesses that accumulate more reviews can rank higher in organic results.

But review quality is more important than quantity. So it's important for you to request Google reviews (as opposed to Yelp or other reviews) specifically from customers you know are satisfied.

Many small businesses with a loyal and satisfied customer base miss this opportunity simply by not asking. You can

secure such reviews by sending feedback-request emails to customers asking them to share their positive experience and providing a link for where to do so.

Of course it's not possible to guarantee only positive reviews. If a negative review does show up, it's important to provide a quick and thoughtful response that acknowledges the concern and provides a solution.

4. Focus on a specialization. If you're having trouble ranking near the top due to heavy competition, try making your search terms more specific and specialized in order to capture a niche. For example, you might be able to rank more highly for "kitchen remodeling" rather than just "remodeling" or "emergency dentist" rather than just "dentist."

5. Attack on multiple fronts. Don't expect a free Google listing to be your entire marketing effort. To gain more traction it's important to use a mix of local search, a strong, mobile-optimized website, and other locally focused marketing campaigns. Different methods work together to reinforce one another and improve your results.

Daniel Kehrer is a national authority on small business, startups and entrepreneurship. Follow him at twitter.com/140Main.



CHERYL EVANS/THE REPUBLIC

Rami Kalla, owner of Point in Time Studios, a video production company that does 3D animation, virtual reality, commercials, marketing videos, and documentaries, plays around with a current virtual reality project his team is working on.

Studios

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coming an actor. But he opted for safer degrees in business management and Spanish from Arizona State University. He took a lucrative corporate job right after graduation.

The package included a car, signing bonus, lots of travel and a nice paycheck. It seemed far from the livelihood he would have experienced as a struggling young actor.

"Having this big boy job was pretty neat," Kalla said.

But less than two years later, the new-

ness had worn. His creative spirit was stifled.

"I was sitting in a gray cubicle with pictures of my family and a phone I used once a day. I was thinking, 'This is like prison,'" he said.

Kalla planned his departure.

With a young family, Kalla paid off debts and saved money to start Point in Time. He kept his eye on April 15 — the day he'd leave his corporate gig — and actually cross off the days on a calendar leading up to it. He took care of his accounts and made sure not to burn bridges.

After working to get jobs through cold calls and networking, he finally got his first event and was busy from there. He did weddings, corporate events and

private parties and did every job from sales and accounting to editing and filming.

"When there's no guarantee of income, you have to hustle," he said.

Soon, he was able to rent an office and hire a staff. His business was thriving and he opened a full studio with multiple offices.

Then, the recession hit. He sublet all the offices to keep the lights on. He laid some people off. But Kalla refused to give up.

Being a savvy business owner saved him. After negotiating with banks and creditors, moving into a smaller office and joining the peer-to-peer mentoring group Entrepreneurs' Organization, Kalla was able to move into his current

space at the Brickyard in downtown Tempe without debt. He said his company runs leaner with better qualified staff in their jobs.

Kalla credited his co-workers with the resurgence and recent success of his homegrown company. He also said they helped him avoid burnout in this fast-paced industry.

"When I started, I was arrogant. But surviving the recession... you're very humbled," said Kalla, adding that he gets a special thrill from working with small businesses. "I love working with entrepreneurs and hearing their stories excites me. I love being part of their growth and helping them to see and reach those visions."

APS

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plants available on the grid and dispatches them to meet demand as it rises and falls across the West.

"One of the main reasons we decided to participate in the Energy Imbalance Market was because of the potential for savings through the innovative and flexible new tools it provides," Tammy McLeod, vice president of resource management for APS, said in a press release. "We are always looking for ways to save our customers money and, as anticipated, the EIM is providing us that opportunity."

APS generates much of its own power from plants it owns, but like most utilities, it also purchases power from others. APS passes the cost of that power directly to its 1.1 million customers, so any savings accrue to ratepayers.

The EIM also aims to increase the use of renewable energy across the West by helping utilities adjust to the intermittent power that comes at high noon at solar plants or as the breeze picks up on wind farms. The EIM helps

by finding a utility that can use that power, which sometimes gets curtailed if it is not needed on the grid in the local area.

The EIM includes portions of California, Arizona, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

Not all utilities participate in the EIM, but Salt River Project, the public utility serving much of metro Phoenix, will vote on joining the market next week.

The California ISO estimates that for the quarter, it prevented 23,390 megawatt-hours of renewable energy from being curtailed. One megawatt hour is enough power for about 250 homes for an hour.

By ensuring the renewable energy gets used and displaces fossil-fuel power, the EIM reduces carbon emissions that contribute to global climate change. The California ISO estimates that it has reduced carbon emissions in 2015 and 2016 equivalent to removing 32,316 passenger cars from the roads for a year.

For the October-December period, the EIM saved all participating utilities more than \$28 million, and the California ISO reports cumulative savings of \$142.6 million since it was expanded beyond California's borders in November 2014.

Insurance

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tions."

Arizona had only one marketplace insurer in every county except Pima County, and the state had the nation's largest average "benchmark" rate increases, though more than two-thirds of consumers who sign up are eligible for subsidized coverage.

Because of those challenges, Arizona was frequently cited by critics of Obamacare as an example of why former President Barack Obama's signature health law should be repealed and replaced. However, even Gov. Doug Ducey, a critic of the law, urged Congress take a cautious approach toward repealing and replacing the law.

Larry Levitt, senior vice

president at Kaiser Family Foundation, said the figures show that the marketplace is "hardly collapsing."

"There is still significant demand for individual health insurance under the ACA," Levitt said via email. "And with premiums increasing significantly in Arizona, the premium subsidies available through the marketplace make it an even more attractive option for people."

The preliminary figures released Friday indicate the number of people who signed up for coverage or were automatically enrolled in a health plan.

The enrollment report does not reflect the number of people paying their premiums and activating their health plans. The Obama administration released those "effectuated" enrollment reports quarterly, but it's unclear when the Trump administration will report those figures.