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MICHELLE WONG PHOTO

A chance encounter with a survey-taker prompted entrepreneur Raja Jindal to think of a better way for businesses to collect feedback from customers. The result is BarkBack, a Web-based service that rewards loyal customers for their thoughts with perks.

A business' best friend

BarkBack lets retailers reward customer feedback with treats

By Julian Moore

Special to the Business Times

Raja Jindal was boarding a flight to Europe when a woman stopped him and started asking questions for a product survey. When he said he couldn't help her, she became exasperated and told him she'd been having a very hard time getting responses.

For the survey taker, it was a frustrating endeavor. But for Jindal, it was the lightbulb moment for his latest venture. "On the flight over, I just kept thinking 'there has to be a better way to do this,'" he said.

Jindal, an MIT graduate and co-founder of another Santa Barbara startup, health care diagnostics firm BioIQ, has launched a new Internet-based company called BarkBack. The startup aims to help businesses get better feedback from their customers. Here's how it works:

Upon finishing a latte or picking up the dry cleaning, a user creates a one-step account on www.

barkback.com, answers a series of quick questions – for example, "if you were the boss for a day, what would you change about this restaurant?" — and gets a reward for his or her feedback, perhaps a 50 percent discount coupon for the next visit. Business owners customize the questions about their company and user responses go directly to them.

Jindal said the site moves the world of customer satisfaction into the Internet era. For decades, businesses relied on focus groups to gauge customer satisfaction and interest for new products. But between gathering group subjects, hiring researchers and analysts and other costs, Jindal says the time for such elaborate surveys has passed.

"I realized that if big media companies need these surveys, small businesses must too, so I did some research and found that it's your few loyal customers that make up half your profit," he said.

And unlike popular online

review services Yelp and Urbanspoon, compliments or critiques submitted through BarkBack are only seen by the businesses themselves. Jindal said that for many business owners, this kind of feedback is better — they have a chance to hear about a problem and fix it before the rest of the world does. "Unlike sites that exist now, you can't go onto Barkback and say that you found hair in your food and scare other people off," he said.

BarkBack was launched late last year, and thus far about 50 Santa Barbara County businesses have signed up, Jindal said. Many are in the Isla Vista student community surrounding UC Santa Barbara, where he did his graduate work in the materials engineering and science department.

Backyard Bowls is one of the first businesses that signed up for BarkBack. Co-owner Pete Heth said the tool has helped him gather valuable customer feedback. "The

thing is, consumers are usually too polite to tell you what they really think, especially if they hate something," Heth said.

"I like constructive criticism and I've met a lot of people in business who will not listen to a soul, believing that they know what their customers want. Those people are usually the ones that fail in business," Heth said.

The BarkBack website, optimized for mobile viewing, is still in the early stages, and the business plan calls for a smart phone app to be launched soon. "Until now, we've just been trying to build this thing to see if people like it and if it's going to work ... We spent almost no time on the design of the site, we just wanted to get it off the ground," Jindal said. He said he hopes the service will allow business owners to focus on creating loyal, repeat customers. "A lot of businesses focus on constantly getting more customers instead of satisfying the ones you already have."