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SMALL BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT

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iRule develops app for home theater systems

Detroit startup simplifies functions of remote controls

Dale Buss/ Special to The Detroit News

Smartphones have gotten consumers used to consolidating every electronic function in their lives on one little device. Now, a Detroit company called iRule makes it possible to add one more: remote control over your television and even an entire, high-end home-theater system.

Two home theater buffs, Itai Ben-Gal and Victor Nemirovsky, developed the iRule remote control because they were frustrated at having to handle multiple control wands to fire up their own systems and realized that they could develop a smartphone application or app to vanquish the whole problem.

iRule is a start-up venture sponsored by Compuware Corp., housed in the digital giant's headquarters in downtown Detroit, with nearly \$1 million in annualized revenues, customers in 39 countries, nine employees and a plan to use their business model for similar opportunity.

"What we're going after is to bring things that are very sophisticated and complicated to where nonprofessionals can use (remote apps) to deploy them at prices that are affordable," said the 34-year-old Ben-Gal, who is CEO of iRule.

Paul Czarnik, Compuware's chief technology officer, is a fan.

"We don't need to give them much help from the technical side," he said. "We're trying to help them with big-picture ideas they might be open to. It's a good collaboration. They're a dynamic and very nimble company, moving very quickly."

It already has been quite a ride for two former co-workers who began dabbling in the field as hobbyists fed up with their own home theater experiences.

Truly comprehensive and effective, customized universal remote controls for fancy home theater systems can cost thousands of dollars, Ben-Gal said, and customers can take expensive classes to learn how to use them.

"The remotes I liked cost more than a car," said Ben-Gal, a former auto-supplier engineer. The 38-year-old Nemirovsky, iRule's chief technical officer, worked with him as a programmer.

"We were both working, with families, and we didn't need to have any more expectations than that," Ben-Gal recalled.

As they moonlighted, they gained insights that practically impelled them into the marketplace. First, the solution had to be inexpensive. And second, it had to come in the form of a smartphone app that would eliminate the need for yet another device — the TV remote — and be tied to the Internet "cloud" — computer applications and storage in offsite "clouds" or [data centers](#)

So they wrote software they could retail for \$50 and a hardware package that would add \$100 to the cost. But that was peanuts compared with the prevailing prices in the industry.

Word of this development reached professional installers who loved the fact that iRule's Internet-based platform allowed them to help clients fix problems in their homes without the installer having to pay an expensive on-site visit. Soon they were selling the package to fellow home theater fans in 20 countries.

A local physician and fellow audio-visual maven insisted on [investing](#) in iRule to scale up the venture.

"Typically, investors get approached with an idea," Ben-Gal said. "But we already had a product that worked and was well-fleshed out with sale and distribution channels. So we decided we wanted to grow the business, and we could do it in the right way."

Compuware was just starting its venture arm, Ben-Gal said, and recruited iRule as one of its first beneficiaries, giving the fledgling company office space and access to Compuware developers. The relationship has helped iRule flourish quickly.

"Their programmers were working with us over a weekend to get a demo ready for a trade show" in September, Ben-Gal said. "So they're an amazing partner and not just as an investor."

Czarnik returned the compliment. "They're a new breed of start-up: leveraging mobile and [cloud](#) technologies and using them to compete with established business models who are fat, dumb and happy."

From The Detroit News: <http://detnews.com/article/20111117/BIZ/111170360/iRule-develops-app-for-home-theater-systems#ixzz1dyTH4dEL>