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By Ann Meyer

Matchmaker

Sittercity's Genevieve Thiers '00

Dot-com entrepreneur Genevieve Thiers saw the untapped business potential in babysitting. As founder and chief executive of Sittercity, Inc., she uncovered a lucrative market niche matching parents desperate for babysitters with college students eager for extra income.

Thiers modeled her business on the dating service that paired her with her boyfriend. Parents pay an initial fee of \$40, plus \$5 a month, to tap into Sittercity.com's database of 50,000 sitters, each profiled using 30 criteria and references from other parents. Parents and sitters set their own terms. Thiers's database serves 20 markets, from Philadelphia to Dallas to Seattle. "We've turned babysitting into an industry," she says. Time magazine named Sittercity one of the "50 Coolest Websites for 2004."

Thiers had no children and no formal business training. She babysat her way through Boston College, ultimately working for about 30 families. "I didn't think my babysitting experience at BC would be the thing that would end up being my career," says the former English and music major.

With more babysitting referrals than she could handle, Thiers conceived Sittercity while still a student. "I remember thinking, 'Why can't moms go to one place to find all the babysitters instead of having to go from college to college?'" After graduation, she took a job as an editor with IBM, but began setting up Sittercity – interviewing parents, studying other online matchmaking services – in her spare time. She launched the website in Boston in September 2001. Start-up costs were just \$20,000, and Thiers herself distributed 5,000 fliers on 12 Boston-area college campuses. About 600 sitters signed on in three weeks. Investors were less easily wooed. "Honestly, they laughed," she recalls.

In July 2002, Thiers moved the company to Chicago, where she earned a master's degree in opera, part-time, and joined forces with Stacy Ratner JD'99 (her boyfriend's sister), who had successfully built another dot-com company. With Ratner as creative director, the company soon will close on its second \$1 million of private investment. Thiers "stayed with a simple concept," says investor Bruce Geier, of RMS Management in Cleveland. "She built a better mousetrap."