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Photos: Evolution of the high tech happy hour



Kevin Virobik-Adams AMERICAN-STATESMAN

(enlarge photo)

Rhonda Bush, left, chats with Denise Vasquez, recruiter for Human Code, at the High Tech Happy Hour held at La Zona Rosa in 2000.



Kevin Virobik-Adams AMERICAN-STATESMAN

(enlarge photo)

Erick Clark of NotHarvard.com checks the company website at the Traffic Jam Happy Hour at La Zona Rosa in 2000.

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TECHNOLOGY

Austin's high tech happy hour scene parties like it's 1999

By Omar L. Gallaga
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Friday, March 28, 2008

When zombies claw their way out of the grave, they do it slowly, steadily, carefully; no use losing a jaw.

And so it is with Austin's high-tech happy hour scene, which over the past year has cautiously arisen from the dead, emerging from a gravestone with "1998-2001" on it.

Back then, local Internet companies and their sponsors poured money into extravagant parties at places like Speakeasy and La Zona Rosa. Now, a more tightly focused set of tech parties crowds calendars. They're fueled by online social sites like LinkedIn, Facebook and Meetup.com that have emerged since the dot-com boom, as well as a renewed interest in face-to-face networking that those sites have helped create.

Despite efforts by some to avoid the excess of those dizzying dot-com days, some of the new gatherings are growing quickly, signaling the breadth of the Austin tech industry and how connected it's becoming.

On a Tuesday night in February, about 150 fresh-from-MBA-program entrepreneurs, grizzled vets from the semiconductor industry, staffing recruiters, programmers and bloggers crowded J. Black's Feel Good Lounge on West Sixth Street. The initial tentativeness (the sticky name tags, the uncertain meeting-and-greeting, the pocket-digging business card exchanging) morphed within an hour and a half into a festive party lubricated by a steady flow of beer and snacks.

The happy hour brought together two Austin tech groups, GeekAustin — essentially an e-mail list of techies kept by happy hour organizer Lynn Bender — and Dorkbot-Austin, a monthly gathering of electronic artists.

Bender, a long-time Austinite who once ran Europa Books, keeps the guest lists tight for GeekAustin events to make sure everyone can connect and that his invitees share interests. But he's seeing many other events — from informal 20-person user group gatherings to happy hours with more than 500 people on the invite list — contribute to a scene that's starting to party like it's 1999.

"Before the first tech bubble burst ... you could go to a corporate-sponsored happy hour almost every day," Bender said, "Right now, it's Bubble 2.0."

Before the bust

At their peak, the high-tech happy hours attracted thousands of people at a time into downtown clubs and music halls. Open bars and free food were the norm. Tech recruiters snapped up hot young talent while established tech companies worked to

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retain their employees with a fistful of drink tickets and stock options.

Chris and Caroline Valentine worked the happy hours from opposite ends before they were married. She was a recruiter seeking engineers while Chris ran the operations for NetWorker.com, a startup that used corporate sponsors to put on some of the most lavish parties the Austin tech community has ever seen.

The happy hours, Chris Valentine admits, "Just became too large. You couldn't actually move around." What were supposed to be networking and deal-making events turned into big, crazy parties. "The first hour was networking. The rest was a party. Corporations don't really want to pay for a party," he said.

When the money in the dot-com industry dried up, the human resources and marketing departments at companies folded or cut back on staff and expenses. The high-tech happy hours morphed into pink-slip parties and "low-tech happy hours," a backlash against the tech industry's sense of entitlement. "It was almost like an excess and arrogance that was happening. Anyone who wasn't involved in (tech) was almost second-class," Chris Valentine said.

"The (Austin) Chronicle was twice as big. The airways were full of ads for jobs," Caroline Valentine said. "Companies were literally giving away beer and food if you would come apply for a job — that's how crazy it was!"

Chris now works on AdeoTours, which does technology for tourism bureaus, so he travels instead of hitting local events. But his wife is still active on the happy hour scene as a recruiter and startup consultant for her own firm, Valentine & Associates. She said today's high-tech happy hours are more focused on specific segments of the tech community than those of the past, which lumped everyone together in a big room and let the booze flow.

"It does seem like everyone's learned from the mistakes," she said. "They're trying to focus them to make them have more meaning."

Austin tech groups such as Bootstrap Austin, the Austin Linux Group, the Association for Women in Technology and the Austin Wireless Alliance regularly hold happy hours that can range from a dozen attendees to more than 50.

Fueled by face-to-face

Matt Genovese has a fast, friendly and funny voice, what you hear when Drew Carey is winding up a contestant on "The Price is Right." It's not hard to imagine him greeting the more than 550 people who have RSVP'd (plus 100 "maybes") for an upcoming happy hour that his social networking Web site, Door64.com, is sponsoring at J. Black's. How will all those people fit in a club that can only hold about 225 comfortably?

"I don't think they're all going to be coming at one time," he said, confidently. "That's what I'm counting on."

Genovese, an engineer at Freescale Semiconductor, threw his first Door64 happy hour in September, soon after the Web site launched. It attracted about 50 people to the Gingerman.

The next two happy hours grew exponentially, fueled by Genovese's use of LinkedIn to screen his guest list and promote the event, as well as increasing interest in Door64. As with Lynn Bender, he remembers the big dot-com happy hours but wants to keep his events focused.

"It's not that easy to find people who are technical," Genovese said of other happy hours he'd been to. "You end up talking to financial planners or people who are interested in tech, but really want to sell you a house."

He hopes to make Door64 a hub for Austin tech events and for the happy hours to be the face-to-face meeting place for people in industries such as semiconductors, Web design and programming. "I want to help people find each other," Genovese said. "I'm a semiconductor guy during the day. I want to find more people like me."

Also like Bender, Genovese keeps an extensive list of contacts that is powered up with new people after every event.

Genovese is working to make Door64 a place where people will post photos and stories after his events. He shoots videos at his happy hours and posts them there. Other happy hours, like the ones presented by GeekAustin, employ photographers who upload pictures to sites such as Flickr.com to share with partygoers.

Unlike the happy hours of the dot-com era, the immediacy of the always-on Internet means people who know one another online first — whether it be on Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter — are meeting face-to-face and then deepening their virtual connections the next morning. After they've exchanged business cards at a high-tech happy hour, attendees can typically expect a few LinkedIn invitations in their inboxes the next day.

Many techies still receive their invitations to such events over e-mail, but a number are also delivered through sites such as Yahoo's Upcoming, Facebook's Groups feature or on Socializr.com, where those going can sometimes see who else is attending.

The healthy happy hour scene is good news for bars like J. Black's. Sean Fric, a manager and co-owner of the club, said his staff has spent the eight months since J. Black's has been open focusing on booking happy hours as often as possible.

With a successful happy hour, 50 to 150 customers who wouldn't otherwise be there can fill the coffers of the bar on an otherwise slow Tuesday.

"We try to do a good job as far as meeting their needs," Fric said. "I made sure to have as many (audio-visual) capabilities as we could."

Job hunting

It's a Thursday night and two new happy hours are launching. One is held in North Austin at the Italian restaurant Buca di Beppo by a group called Austin Top Guns, which is geared to executives. Another takes place at the same time downtown: It's at J. Black's and put on by Net Impact, a new Austin chapter of a community service group for people in business.

The Top Guns event attracts about 70 people, several of whom have been laid off from Dell Inc., or who have jobs in tech but aren't quite secure enough in their positions to stop keeping their options open.

Others, like Ruchir Purwar, a manager at Dell for four years, just want to get out and meet new people. Purwar spent more time socializing when he worked for a startup called NewsStand Inc. "You're going out there and promoting your product. You're more likely to do that at a smaller company," he said.

Over pizza and wine (subsidized by a \$10 entry donation), Top Guns attendee Laura Lee MacDonald job hunts, looking for recruiters or opportunities. She remembers going to big tech happy hours of 10 years ago, but she said the events now serve a stronger purpose for her. "The big thing is reaching out and getting to know people at different levels."

Attendees at Top Guns events in other cities are typically what those in the tech industry call "C-Level" — chief executives, chief financial officers and other "Cs" who don't want to be bombarded by vendors or people looking for jobs at general-invitation happy hours.

Downtown the same night, the turnout for Net Impact is about 20 people, but chapter director Sarah Cooke (who also works at Dell) was pleased. "We're brand new. It's what we were expecting," Cooke said.

A short presentation is followed by meeting-and-greeting. Cooke said organizing the evening was easy and that she has a full year of events planned with many happy hours sprinkled in for the 70 members the group has so far.

Those members decided online to have an informal happy hour as their first event.

At the meeting, they chat over drinks and hand out business cards, still dressed in work clothes.

Another happy hour is born, and the Austin tech nightlife scene looks quite alive once again. Healthy, even.

Getting Austin-networked on the Net

Door64.com — Features an extensive calendar of tech events in Austin, as well as discussion forums.

GeekAustin.org — GeekAustin, which partners with other tech groups for its happy hours, posts event news and updates on its site.

LinkedIn.com — The most widely used social networking site for business people.

NetworkInAustin.com — A subscription site, it also features a free area that lists upcoming business and networking events.

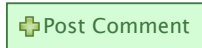
Austintechhh.com — The Austin Tech Happy Hour holds monthly get-togethers; no RSVP required.

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