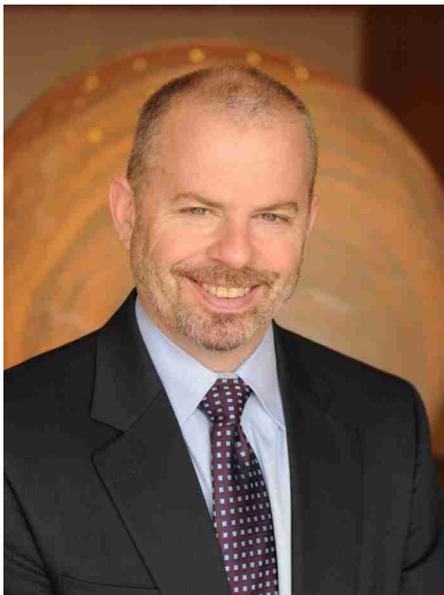




Now working with over 1,300 Nonprofit and Association Communities, CommPartners is helping them Utilize Education to engage their Communities and Create Loyalty

**Business Services
Associations**

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7230 Lee DeForest Drive,
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Rich Finstein
CEO

BIO:

President Rich founded CommPartners as a provider of online learning services and events in 1994. His vision was to create a culture where people could learn, advance their careers and have fun. He has a passion for helping clients connect with their communities through education. Rich graduated from the University of Maryland and did his graduate work at Marymount University in instructional design. He now lives in Columbia, Md., with his wife of 31 years. He has

two grown children: Eve, who is 27, and Robby, who is 24. Rich enjoys marathon running, biking, tennis and rooting for Baltimore sports teams.

About CommPartners:

CommPartners began in 1994 as a provider of enhanced messaging services (i.e. "fax-to-mail"). The company was formed in the "infamous" basement office of Richard Finstein, our founder. The first group of clients were associations in the Washington DC area. These initial experiences set in motion the relationship between CommPartners and the Association Community that has now extended to over 1,300 organizations.

**Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor
CEOCFO Magazine**

CEOCFO: Mr. Finstein, would you tell us the vision at CommPartners today?

Mr. Finstein: Our mission is to provide our clients with a comprehensive educational offering. We help them utilize education to engage their communities and create loyalty. We are able to meet every opportunity and every need that a client might have in regards to an online education.

CEOCFO: Is there a set group of clients?

Mr. Finstein: Primarily our clients are associations and nonprofits. They account for about 90% of our business.

CEOCFO: What are some of the differences, in general, when you are working with nonprofits and associations as compared to a commercial enterprise?

Mr. Finstein: Working with an association or a nonprofit our focus is on creating that engagement with their community and their core purpose is not necessarily aligned with profit but alternatively focused on a mission or cause. Typically, they are very passionate about what they do. Helping them support that passion through allowing them to engage their community through education is quite different than when profit is the primary factor.

CEOCFO: How have associations been offering training and learning and what do you bring to the table?

Mr. Finstein: Increasingly associations are redefining their mission, increasingly having to compete with other private entities or corporations or publishers to define their space and engage their communities. We help them think in terms of how they can leave behind that typical model that served them so well over many years. Today they have to think differently and we help them utilize education and market knowledge to define their space to compete with these other entities.

CEOCFO: What is the competitive landscape like for developing online training and is there much specifically in the association and nonprofit area?

Mr. Finstein: I find there are a group of companies like us that primarily support this community. If you are going to work with associations and non-profits, you really need to be a part of it and be involved in programs provided through organizations like the American Society of Association Executives. You need to understand their greatest challenges. It is difficult to come from an organization that

primarily supports commercial clients and apply that logic to associations. They have their own way of doing things. What is typically in play with an association, are boards that have to make decisions that approve decisions, especially significant capital outlays. It is generally a slower process in making those decisions because of all the required approvals and the impact the services have on these organizations. It is really a nurturing process as you begin those conversations defining the needs, the requirements and assessing what needs to be done and then presenting a proposal to help them. The complete process is unique compared to commercial organizations.

CEOCFO: Do you develop the courses for the association?

Mr. Finstein: We started out in live online learning. We have a production team that manages every element of a live opportunity whether a webinar, webcast, virtual conference, hybrid event. Our team is an extension of our client's staff; you can think of it as a wedding planner planning all the details, we plan all those details. There are maybe thirty to forty items that need to happen for a successful event. It is not one or two but a combination of many tasks that need to be completed to ensure success.

We also have worked with our clients to provide them in the learning management system that allows them to store their courses and their other learning objects, which could be documents, self paced presentations, live events and custom learning in a portal. They use the portal or learning community as a way to engage their stakeholders. The community becomes a key loyalty driver and. I think there was a book that ASAE published, The Decision to Learn that rated education as the number one or two loyalty drivers among associations, including why people join and remain a member.

CEOCFO: How do you reach potential customers?

Mr. Finstein: We participate heavily in the community. Just this week, we have been in three different events focusing on associations so we try to be where they are meeting. We exhibit, attend events and speak at events. Since 95% of our clients come from this community, we can afford to invest heavily in continuing to evolve our reputation and our services towards meeting their goals.

CEOCFO: Are there services you would like to add?

Mr. Finstein: We are always evolving and coming up with some new platforms to meet our clients greatest challenges. I am not at liberty now to discuss it but we want to continue to be on the cutting-edge for our clients. Like in any field, when you first start doing these types of things, for example in live events, you are happy just to be able to put on a program and

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- Rich Finstein

have it be reliable, have people log on in successfully and participate. Now we are moving to areas such as social learning where participants are actively engaged to ensure they have the most rewarding learning experience. We are creating portals where members of communities can share those real-life experiences and we can support that peer learning. It follows the logic of... “I can learn as much from somebody doing my job in another state as I can from my association”. The role of the association is changing. They are more moving into that facilitation position where bringing members together and providing a forum to share those experiences. That is what we are focusing on.

CEOCFO: Do many of your clients take advantage of the full range of your services, how do you encourage that?

Mr. Finstein: I think many of our clients use us for a specific service and may not realize the breadth and the depth of our other offerings. We try to build those relationships and build loyalty with those organizations by constantly connecting with them either through community and social media, through our email publications, through other targeting campaigns such as webinars. We are always trying to provide education to our clients. Instead of marketing to them, we would rather be thought leaders which allow them to participate in learning programs. This is our business. We use that to show them we are on the cutting-edge and that we are working with other thought leaders to improve education within the community.

CEOCFO: How is business these days?

Mr. Finstein: It is good. Friends of mine always ask how you can anticipate and change to meet this demand that you have and I tell them that there is a necessity for us to evolve and change every year. This is a fast-moving field and you have to keep up. There is a limited time that a service is going to be popular and cutting-edge.

You need to keep evolving and that is where we focus. We run in six-month cycles and we are always thinking about what is next.

CEOCFO: What surprised you most as you have developed the business?

Mr. Finstein: What I think of as most rewarding from this experience starting a company from scratch and now developing a progressive culture with a group of staff members that work well together and play together. We have the opportunity to be creative and have fun. We have great minds here. Just to be able to come in every day and meet with our teams and have that opportunity to have no limits is very exciting and a great way to work. The secondary benefit is we have about 60% to 70% of our staff are under 35 years and many under 30 years. We provide a first experience for them where they can adapt

to the work environment and have a positive opportunity, knowing they are supported, nurtured and they can grow personally and professionally.

CEO CFO: What do you look for over and above technical skills?

Mr. Finstein: For me what framed it well was the Stephen Covey book, It is a Matter of Trust. I look for people to develop that trust, which sometimes happens quickly and sometimes it takes a while. It is important that your key people are managing parts of your business successfully and you have that trust. You have this quiet confidence while you work together which is critical. If you have the right people in place, it just makes it so much easier and that is something you learn over time.

Sometimes in the beginning, I remember trying to force situations and as much as you try, if you do not have the right person, it is just not going to

work. Over many years, we have been able to cultivate a great group of leaders who are managing part of our business and it just makes my life so much easier. As far as new people coming in, we are looking for staff that has that are independent thinkers, sensitive and caring, good listeners, and posses excellent empathy skills

CEO CFO: How do you ensure the user friendliness of your systems?

Mr. Finstein: We have an excellent team of developers, designers and programmers. We thoroughly test every system. We have developed some very sophisticated applications including for example a virtual boardroom where instead of a whole board flying to a city, spending their weekend away from home or their business, we can provide Roberts Rules of Order through a custom web application. Participants can be in their home and still run an official meeting

with parliamentary procedure. That is a very complex type of application.

CEO CFO: Why should the business and investment community pay attention to CommPartners?

Mr. Finstein: I think it comes down to the level of care that we take with each client. We try to put ourselves in their shoes and understand the greatest challenges. It is the continuity in care that supports the final product. From there, it is how we nurture that relationship and the resources we put forth to ensure that client is completely satisfied. Finally, it is innovation. Organizations depend on a company like us for guidance, and to help define what is next. It is through those creative conversations that we anticipate the future and we help our clients get there. I do not think there is enough of that. I have seen that many companies focus on selling their products. We are all about enduring relationships.



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