

Internet company hopes to get out the vote

By Michael Buchanan

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While the Internet has become a popular place for shopping, communicating and a myriad of other uses, it has yet to be embraced by most election officials as a place for people to vote.

Some question the security of entrusting the country's most essential tool of democracy to cyberspace. Others claim getting rid of the traditional ballot box would be unfair to voters who are not computer savvy or do not have access to technology.

Lori Steele is hoping to change those perceptions. As chief executive officer of the Internet voting company Everyone Counts, Steele brought Internet voting to millions of students as part of the National Student Parent Mock Election on Oct. 28.

The event, which is in its 28th year, allowed students and parents to cast their votes via the Internet for various state and national elections, including the presidency. An estimated 5 million students participated this year in all 50 states.

Her company partnered with the San Diego-based Web hosting company SimpleNet to run the Internet portion of the election. Steele, who started an Encinitas-based subsidiary of the Australian company nine months ago, said the event fulfills one of her company's goals: to get young people hooked on voting.

"You have to teach kids democracy early on or they're never going to vote," Steele said. "They are our next generation of voters."

Another goal of her company is to break through the stigma of alternative election technology, which has been bolstered by California's recent controversy over touch-screen voting machines. With elections worldwide roughly estimated as a \$230 billion-a-year industry, Steele hopes the exposure her company gets from the mock election could help her convince local election officials to experiment with new technology.

Founded in 1997 by Australian software engineer Craig Burton, Everyone Counts provides software for elections, polls and surveys. Steele said the company's annual sales last year were approximately \$750,000.

Steele said her company's edge is its transparency. Unlike other Internet election companies, Everyone Counts makes its computer coding public so that programmers can make sure the election software is working.

"Government elections need to be transparent," Steele said.

But while they can see the code, Steele said they are not able to manipulate it -- thus keeping it safe from hackers.

"We want to make sure people can trust what our software is doing and what we say it can do," Steele said.

So far, private elections -- such as those done by labor unions -- have warmed up to alternative

technology quicker than public elections. Part of that revolves around the security of the Internet where, for example, approximately 10 percent of all financial transactions are fraudulent, according to a 2001 report published by the Congressional Research Service.

But Steele points to the convenience the Internet provides, particularly for voters who may be out of their precinct or out of the country on election day.

Steele said most of her company's business has been in the private sector, but "pilot" projects -- such as the mock election -- could help the company land more public elections, which are larger and generate more revenue. Aside from the mock election, Everyone Counts is also scheduled to do a mock school election in Okaloosa County, Fla., on Nov. 2. More than 26,000 students are expected to participate in the mock election.

The company is also negotiating pilot projects in Switzerland, Spain, Australia and the United Kingdom, she added.

As head of company operations in the United States and developing countries, Steele said her goal is to participate in 10 election pilots by the middle of 2005 and to secure 20 percent of the Internet voting market in the United States by the middle of 2006.

And despite what the critics are saying, Steele said she believes the days of placing a paper ballot in a box are numbered given all the advances in technology both in the United States and abroad.

"The fact is that this is going to happen in the future because this is the direction the world is going," Steele said. "Why wait another 10 or 20 years?"