Couch Agent

Daniel hoffer '99 is no stranger to start-ups. A self-described "serial entrepreneur," he spent a great deal of time creating businesses in his Leverett House room, ranging from a software consulting firm to a website offering resources related to soccer. Now, even though he works full-time in general management at Symantec, Hoffer continues to satisfy his passion for entrepreneurship and his love of travel at the same time. "I have always enjoyed traveling on the spur of the moment, without a lot of structure or planning," he says. His latest venture, Couchsurfing.com, allows him and other likeminded individuals to do exactly that worldwide.

COURTESY OF DANIEL HOFFER

Dan Hoffer tries couchsurfing of a different kind off the coast of Hawaii.

"When you surf a couch, you are a guest at someone's house," the Couchsurfing website explains. "They will provide you with some sort of accommodation, a penthouse apartment or maybe a backyard to pitch your tent in. Stays can be as short as a cup of coffee, a night or two, or even a few months or more." Founded in 2004, the organization is a network in which users can create profiles, seek out places to surf, and offer their own couches as destination points. Some 220 countries are represented on the site, and Hoffer, who as chief operating officer heads up the project's advertising and revenue-generation component, estimates that about 300,000 people have signed up thus far.

"My friends and I all had a background doing a lot of travel and couchsurfing," the Brooklyn native explains. "For example, I took a semester off from college my junior year and worked on a ranch in Texas and couch-surfed there. It was actually one of my partners, Casey Fenton [now chief technology officer] who proposed the website, and it's grown from there. We were aware that other people might not be as proactive as we were in seeking out places to stay."

In addition to connecting travelers with one another, the website also provides useful information for surfers on etiquette within different cultures, guidelines on how to be a good host, and even suggestions for how to deal with surfers who overstay their welcome.

Couchsurfing.com is a nonprofit organization; according to Hoffer, donations and payments for identity verification maintain the network. The identity-verification system is one of the cornerstones of couch-surfing safety, he explains. "We use credit-card data to verify that people live at the address that they've provided. It's a basic security measure that is not foolproof, but still helps to create a safer community." Within the network as well, members have taken it upon themselves to make safety a high priority, Hoffer adds. "The community self-polices in the sense that, much like eBay, members give references to each other and describe the experiences they've had."

Hoffer acknowledges that the organization is no ordinary company. "We don't have a CEO," he notes as a quick example. "Traditional business concepts don't strictly apply. We've broken a lot of rules in how we thought about it, and as a result we have a thriving community that doesn't conform to a neat business definition."

Hoffer himself makes full use of that community's benefits. "A highlight was couch-surfing in Sicily one New Year's Eve. My host took me on a cruise off the coast," he recalls. "I spent the whole night dancing, and never would have known about the cruise, or how to get a ticket for it, if I hadn't been with my host." Beyond individual encounters, he adds, "there are gatherings around the world of up to 300 people who'll get together to throw parties, have intercultural explorations, and get to know each other. Couchsurfing is considered not just a company, but, to a degree, a social movement." ~ Ashton R. Lattimore