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Can 100 chattering Silicon Valley techies give new products a boost?
By David Whelan



Ralph (Buddy) Arnheim, a lawyer for tech companies, loves the shiny, new \$600 digital toilet seat in the master bath of his Los Altos Hills, Calif. home—a combination toilet, bidet and, yes, butt blow dryer. What's not to like? He got it for free. And so did 50 other big-shot Silicon Valley types, including Napster cofounder Sean Parker and venture capitalist Heidi Roizen.

They are members of a group called the Silicon Valley 100 (others include Netscape founder Marc Andreessen and venture capitalist Timothy Draper), chosen for their interest in swag—and supposed opinion-making ability. Vendors of new gizmos hope these folks will like the gadgets, talk them up and generate a few sales. Viral marketing with a forced draft.

That's what happened with the toilets. Soon after the seats were installed, articles about them popped up in newspapers and blogs, helping Brondell Inc. secure distribution deals with Home Depot and Bed Bath & Beyond.

Since January Silicon Valley 100 members have received six products, including a \$264 videogame mail-order service, a \$250 computerized fitness test and \$149 specialty earphones. The middleman: Auren Hoffman, 31, an irrepressible networker and consultant to startups.

Live by buzz, die by buzz. Arnheim didn't like the noise-isolating earphones he received from Etymotic Research in February, which is one reason the Silicon Valley 100 didn't help sell a lot of the product. "This is a roll of the dice," concedes David Hodess, who heads GameFly, the videogame subscription service.

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