

cover story

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Cool Companies

Our third annual listing of companies that are hip and happening.

For a four-letter slang, cool is notoriously hard to get a handle on. There are myriad definitions of the word, but none that captures its meaning in its entirety. But here's the thing: When something's cool, you just know it. Finding cool companies, however, is a slightly more complicated task. For, cool isn't about, say, having a zany done up office cafeteria, mischievously named conference rooms, or unconventional designations. Cool, when applied to businesses, boils down to two things: What you do, and how you do it. It doesn't matter whether you are big or small, old or new, listed or privately-held, profitable or loss-making. What does is that you must be onto something cool-and, for this listing, be Indian-owned. To compile this year's list of Cool Companies, BT spoke with venture capitalists, analysts, industry experts and seasoned managers. The final compilation is as interesting as it is varied. In the pages that follow, you will find a health-meal firm launched by an IIT-IIM alumnus in response to his own quest for calorie-counted meals; a former MIT fellow and acknowledged innovator passionate about electronics, pushing the boundaries in digital signal processing; a three-month-old start-up coming up with a simple, but innovative solution to make mobile commerce work; and a 74-year-old home-grown fitness brand gearing up to give its global competitor a run for its money.

Needless to say, there were many other nominees that bt considered. But when put through our test for innovativeness and spunk, only 10 held up without any effort. Take a look:

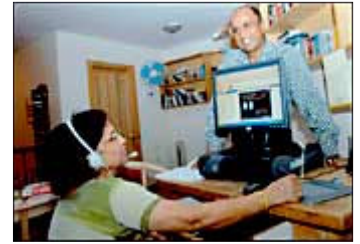
Virtual Tutor

When American kids have a math problem, they call up India.

At around 5 o'clock every evening, Lalitha Venkatesan, a 60-something grandmother in Bangalore with 25 years of teaching experience, takes a break from her daily chores to begin her tuitions. However, unlike those of other tutors, her pupils are nowhere to be seen. Instead, Venkatesan logs on to the internet and gets set to take a virtual class in mathematics or English for her American students thousands of miles away. Welcome to the future of tutoring in the US. And creating this future is K. Ganesh, CEO of TutorVista. "American children require extra tutoring, but since it costs \$40-60 (Rs 1,880-2,820) an hour, many of them are unable to get it," says Ganesh, a serial entrepreneur who sold his BPO company CustomerAsset to ICICI OneSource in May 2002 for \$19.3 million (Rs 94.57 crore then).

TutorVista's business model is simple. It offers its clients (ranging from school kids to middle-aged executives) a one-time \$100 (Rs 4,700)

subscription package for unlimited tutorials. And its 'faculty', like Venkatesan, is scattered around the country, from Visakhapatnam to Varanasi, and each works from his or her home or a cyber café, accessing a secure online e-learning module to teach the students. (A couple of tutors are even located overseas.) That means, except its 25-person software centre, TutorVista, which raised \$2 million (Rs 9.4 crore) from Sequoia Capital India earlier this year, has no overheads. In the months to come, Ganesh wants to both expand his geographical reach to the Far East and offer more subjects such as Mandarin and Spanish. "We believe that TutorVista will usher in the next b2c (business-to-consumer) wave in this industry," says Ganesh. At this point, it seems hard to disagree with him.



Long distance education: Ganesh (standing) and tutors like Venkatesan have made learning a virtual experience

TUTORVISTA

It spotted an opportunity in America's poor grades
FOUNDED: July 2005
REVENUES: Not available

-Rahul Sachitanand

