LATIN TRADE

YOUR BUSINESS SOURCE FOR LATIN AMERICA

JANUARY 2001 | VOL. 9 NO. 1

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Star Man

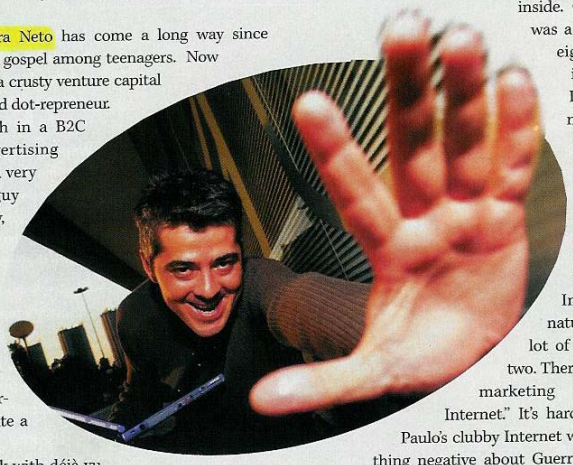
Brazil's best-known dot-com booster makes his way home—to a new B2B roost.

BY THIERRY OGIER • SÃO PAULO

BRAZIL'S INTERNET WHIZ KID IS BACK AFTER A YEAR OF self-imposed exile in New York. And everyone here is following the story: The man who introduced business-to-consumer portal StarMedia to the local Internet community is now into business-to-business—big time.

Índio Brasileiro Guerra Neto has come a long way since spreading the StarMedia gospel among teenagers. Now 36, he sounds more like a crusty venture capital veteran than a starry-eyed dot-repreneur.

"I don't believe much in a B2C model funded by advertising anymore," he says. "It's a very fragile base. Some guy comes up and says, 'Hey, we've got a billion page views.' I say, so what? You've got liquidity or you don't." Coming from someone who claims to be the first person to have sold advertising on the Internet in Brazil, this is quite a conversion.



Índio Brasileiro Guerra Neto

Guerra's return is thick with déjà vu. Parking his black 1972 Mercedes convertible in the garage of the São Paulo World Trade Center, he gets off the elevator a few floors below the StarMedia offices he himself set up almost three years ago.

Guerra spent a year in New York as vice president of the fast-moving Internet firm, StarMedia, founded by Uruguayan Fernando Espuelas. His challenge now is to kick-start operations for Net accelerator ITC Ventures, as general partner and country manager. The mission: spot talent and to turn it into gold.

Yet, he insists, ITC is much more than an incubator. The idea is to provide comprehensive support for B2B service projects from initial funding to rollout, emphasizing financial performance. "It's a pioneer model, and it's the vision that the market is asking for today," Guerra explains.

Portals are like medieval castles, he says. There were a few of them, extremely powerful and necessary; then, the burgs that emerged in their vicinity provided the dynamism and the strength of business capitalism. "My focus is on these digital market burgs, and there are a lot of good business opportunities down there," Guerra says.

The rise and rise. The great-grandson of an Austrian immigrant who changed his name to Índio Brasileiro upon arriving in the southern city of Porto Alegre, Guerra is a bit of an old-timer on the local Internet scene. He received a business degree at São Paulo's Pontifícia Universidade Católica, joined the marketing team at the leading Brazilian bank, Bradesco, then became advertising manager for the Folha media group. Folha, in turn, launched Universo Online in partnership with Brazilian publisher Abril in the mid-90s.

During those three-and-a-half years, he witnessed the birth of the Brazilian Internet economy from the inside. Clearly, that experience was a valuable asset to a foreign company about to invest in Latin America. In 1998, UOL's commercial director was recruited by StarMedia to launch the Portuguese version of the pan-Latin American portal from São Paulo. His conversion from media manager to Internet exec was quite natural, he says: "There are a lot of similarities between the two. There has been a migration of marketing professionals to the Internet." It's hard to find anyone in São Paulo's clubby Internet world who would say anything negative about Guerra. Even those who don't know him personally describe him as a visionary. "He's very clever at jumping from one thing to another at the right time," says Paul Heath, CEO of iG International. "He is also good at making the right move before everybody else, and this is quite a valuable instinct in the marketplace."

Away from the blinking monitors of the Internet world, Guerra seems happiest surrounded by classic cars, motorbikes, and white-sand beaches, all things he says he badly missed in New York. Even though he speaks at times with a childlike excitement, he knows how to keep his cool and make rational, down-to-earth decisions. "In times of euphoria, you can party," he says. "In times of crisis, you have to do business and focus on results." LT

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