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A new angle on distance learning

By Steve Hamm

Anything that can be done over the Web can be done in India--so why not tutoring? I recently came across a company in Bangalore that's doing just that. The company, Tutorvista, started operations in a beta sort of way in late 2005, but only started marketing aggressively late last year.

This is a really interesting company. It offers families in North America and Europe a pretty compelling financial deal: unlimited tutoring in math and English for \$100 a month. This is the first Indian off-shoring service aimed at consumers.

The tutors, 500 of them so far, work from their homes in 23 Indian cities. They all have masters degrees or dual bachelors degrees in education and a specialty. The tutors conduct online sessions with their students that include the ability to speak to one another via VOIP and to share an electronic whiteboard. So far, Tutorvista has about 2000 students. That doesn't seem like a lot, but Ganesh Krishnan, the company's CEO, says it's ahead of the business plan. "We've made something that was unaffordable to the common man affordable—thanks to low-priced Indian labor and the Internet," he says.

The deal certainly seems good for customers. Rather than pay local tutors \$40 to \$50 per one-hour session, they get all they can consume in a month for \$100.

The business model is pretty sweet for Tutorvista, too. It recruits and trains tutors online and pays them \$300 to \$400 a month. It doesn't spend much on marketing; most of its customers come to it via word of mouth.

The company faces some stiff challenges. How does a small, little-known Indian company convince people in the US and UK to shell out \$100 for tutoring over the Internet? It's all so new and unproven.

Still, Krishnan is confident enough in a gradual buildup in business that he's already experimenting with new services. He's piloting an English-as-a-second-language program in Korea, and plans on eventually selling it worldwide. Plus he plans on offering Spanish tutoring worldwide as well—with the tutors in Argentina, Costa Rica and elsewhere.