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MATHEW MCCARTHY, RECORD STAFF

Ali Asaria launched Well.ca, an online store that sells health products.

Well.ca finds secret to online success

By Greg Mercer, Special to The Record

It's noon inside a downtown church basement and a group of 20-somethings are buzzing about to the sounds of rock 'n' roll blasting from a nearby laptop, filling boxes with shampoo, cough syrup and moisturizer.

The products they pack – from the latest must-have hand cream mentioned by Oprah to 30-packs of discontinued deodorant – will be shipped across the country.

This church basement is the busy warehouse of Well.ca, a Guelph-based online pharmacy that is growing so fast its address has changed four times in 14 months. In November, the company founded by former Research In Motion software engineer Ali Asaria will move once more – this time, he hopes, for good. Part of that expansion will be financed by \$1.1 million in private investment intended to help the company catch up with demand.

Hard to believe this is the same startup that only a few years ago consisted of four guys working out of a closet, wheeling shipments on a cart to the Canada Post office around the corner. Back then, the company offered about 100 items on its website. Today, Well.ca stocks more than 18,000 products, and its employees will soon number about 30.

Growing pains seem to be the only troubles bothering Asaria, whose shipments are doubling roughly every four months. He won't talk hard numbers, but says sales are now in the millions of dollars.

Well.ca doesn't sell prescription drugs, but it has had the freedom to grow quickly in a market not served by big Canadian pharmacy chains like Shoppers Drug Mart or Pharmasave, who don't sell products through their websites. Asaria, 28, says "discussions have already started" with some national chains interested in partnerships.

Why partner? The big chains can't replicate the online shopping system that Well.ca has created. As popular as the free shipping and huge, ever-changing inventory are, what makes Well.ca work so well is the unseen software programs that allow the business to ship all those products, he says. "The challenge for them is to build what we've built. It's not easy. This is much more about technology than retail. And those skills are hard to find in Canada."

But the company Asaria created three years ago also is flexible and personable. Every order gets a handwritten note from a staff member. In an office in the church basement, two young women scour through beauty magazines and blogs, making notes on new products to be added to inventory. Three others answer phones and take customers' requests.

Well.ca's young CEO takes a hands-on approach. He'll pack boxes with his staff, and personally delivers some orders that are within walking distance of the warehouse. "They have no idea who I am. They think I work for Canada Post," he says.

Asaria's roots are here too. He grew up helping in his father's pharmacy down the street, and used many of the contacts from that experience when he started Well.ca.

Although Asaria, still known as the creator of the BrickBreaker game for the BlackBerry, knew little about the health and beauty market when he started, he saw a wide open opportunity. He would go where bricks and mortar pharmacies couldn't and offer a discreet way for people to buy products that embarrassed them and would be open to adding new or hard-to-get products that drugstores couldn't match.

In short, Asaria took a chance. "I simply grew tired of working for someone else," he says. "This started as an experiment, to see if we could do it. But I never expected it to grow into this."