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PAGE ONE

At the Davos Conference, Small Fry With Big Dreams Make Network Appearances

Neophytes Court Powerful Attendees; On the Agenda: Blogs, Bovine Beats

By **ERIK PORTANGER**
 Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

DAVOS, Switzerland -- Shielding his face from driving snow, Alex Zelinsky mulls over what made him leave his sun-baked home in Australia for January in the Swiss Alps.

The chief executive of Seeing Machines Pty. Ltd., a tiny Canberra-based technology company, first had to rustle up the already-discounted 7,000-Swiss-franc (\$5,676 or €4,466) fee needed to register for the prestigious World Economic Forum being held here this week. Now, he is cold and has a long trip back to his hotel -- a former hospital on the outskirts of town reachable only by funicular rail.

But Mr. Zelinsky, whose company develops technology that allows computers to monitor people's faces, isn't complaining. Over the next few days, the 43-year-old former professor will get to rub shoulders with the likes of Microsoft Corp. founder Bill Gates, Michael Dell of Dell Inc. and Carly Fiorina, chairman and CEO of Hewlett-Packard Co. With a bit of luck, one of his encounters will lead to something more substantive than a story to tell his grandchildren.

"We are a small company out of Australia and we're trying to play on a global stage," says Mr. Zelinsky as he carefully scans the sidewalk for ice. "What we need to do is find partners who can help us take our technology forward."

To most outsiders, the annual Davos forum is recognized as the world's single-most-influential gathering of corporate chieftains and leading political figures. Among the heads of state and senior officials attending this year are former U.S. President Bill Clinton; Pervez Musharraf, president of Pakistan; and Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres, along with a few "people of the moment," such as the president-elect of Georgia, Mikhail Saakashvili. In past years, Davos has been a platform for major geopolitical developments, such as the now-famous speech by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell at last year's event, in which he effectively declared that the U.S. would go to war with Iraq.

But for all the big shots at Davos, there are also plenty of up and coming little shots -- people like Mr. Zelinsky, who haven't made it yet, but who hope that being here will accelerate the process.

For WEF organizers, inviting small companies isn't just an act of altruism. "We want to expose some of our bigger members to disruptive technologies and influences -- people that are altering the dynamic of their industries," says Kevin Steinberg, a WEF spokesman. "One of the ideas that really concerns them is that challenging and provocative ideas often don't reach them."

Such entrepreneurs make up a diverse but often-forgotten contingent at Davos, combining nonprofit organizations, religious groups and artists -- all of whom are drawn by the networking opportunities provided by the WEF conference.

Davos isn't for everyone. Besides the January weather, there is the 30,000-franc entrance fee -- which may be discounted or waived in certain cases, but only to a small group handpicked by forum organizers.

Among this year's more unlikely invitees: Michael Brammer, a 45-year-old artist from Denmark, whose creations include a sofa made out of cakes and a "cow disco," where visitors can dance with carved wooden bovines to "cow techno" music with a pounding beat backed by lots of mooing. Mr. Brammer, who lives in a cramped Copenhagen flat with no bathroom, looks bemused as he strolls into the Congress Centre on the opening day.

"This reminds me of the Roskilde rock festival [in Denmark, which last year featured such acts as Metallica and Bjork]," he observes. "They both have all these different stages with people performing."

THE DAVOS DEBATE



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Later in the day, Mr. Brammer describes his first panel session: a debate about the issues affecting the global economy. "One of them said the economy would grow at 6.1% and the other said it was 6.2%," he says. "It was very funny."

For those people with small businesses, being at Davos can be a little intimidating at first.

When Loic Le Meur, a 31-year-old entrepreneur and CEO of Ublog, a Paris-based Web-log company, attended the conference for the first time three years ago, he was thrown in at the deep end.

"On the second day, they asked me to speak on a panel about the future of Europe," he recalls. "That was tough."

This time around, though, the affable Frenchman has already struck a few partnership deals through "random networking" -- otherwise known as wandering around in the halls -- that will help him launch his Web site in Brazil and China within the next few months.

One person who hears from plenty of start-up entrepreneurs at Davos is Sir Ronald Cohen, chief executive of Apax Partners, a global private-equity firm that invests as much as 35% of its capital in mainly small technology and biotech companies.

"There are not too many of them, but they flood us with requests for meetings," Sir Ronald says. He tries, though, to make time for people that are still starting out. "The entrepreneur who makes it to Davos clearly has something going for them," he says.

This is the sort of attitude that Mr. Zelinsky at Seeing Machines is hoping to capitalize on before heading back to Australia. Last year, thanks to Davos, he met Jorma Halonen, the CEO of what already was one of his company's biggest shareholders, Volvo Truck Corp., a unit of Volvo AB of Sweden. "I usually only get to deal with the middle management," he says.

This year, he adds, "I am not really expecting to walk away with a deal. But I would like to look back on this at some point and say that it's because I went to WEF that I got this deal 18 months later."

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