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=Hearing Loss Turns Lawyer Into Online Trading Guru

By Johanna Bennett

NEW YORK (Dow Jones)--Jim DePorre has an equal opportunity employer - the Internet.

Twelve years ago, the former tax attorney and certified public accountant ran his own law practice in Ann Arbor, Mich., when he started to lose his hearing. By the time he was 32 years old, DePorre, forced by his hearing problems to abandon a potentially promising legal career, was looking for comfort by surfing the Internet.

Now 42, DePorre still spends most of his time on the Web, even though his hearing was restored last year thanks to an operation. But instead of looking for solace in cyberspace, he trades small-cap stocks from his home on Anna Maria Island off the Florida coast, pulling down, he claims, a seven-figure annual income.

And the trading forum he founded on America Online Inc. (AOL), Shark Attack, has made DePorre, alias "Rev Shark," one of the best-known personalities among a growing crowd of online trading pundits.

"The online world made it all possible for me," DePorre said. "There is no way in hell I could have done this otherwise."

DePorre's success and popularity parallel the rise of the World Wide Web as an investing tool, as well as the growing popularity of day trading, a controversial investment strategy that involves profiting from a stock's short-term momentum.

Founded two years ago, Shark Attack includes chat rooms and message boards, many of them hosted by DePorre's online disciples, as well as a real-money portfolio and a stock-picking contest.

#### Internet Opens Doors For The Deaf

But DePorre's success also illustrates the Internet's growing usefulness to the hearing impaired.

"More and more of our members are online for the same reason (as DePorre)," said Elissa Brooks, spokeswoman for the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group for the hearing impaired. "It opens a different aspect of life and professions. Before they were rather isolated. And now, they can chat with each other, exchange ideas with each other and make friends."

For DePorre, the transition from attorney to online trading guru did not happen overnight. In fact, it was almost accidental.

Ten years ago, the Internet was largely the domain of technology wizards and academics. AOL was barely a ripple. And online brokerage firms did not even exist.

Before he lost his hearing, DePorre rarely used his desktop computer as anything more than a word processor. But by the time he ended his seven-year legal career, DePorre's hearing loss, which eventually resulted in total deafness, kept him from using the telephone, watching movies or eating at a restaurant.

"I just kind of withdrew," DePorre said. "It was too hard to deal with it. I kind of cut myself off from a lot of people."

A little known online service called Prodigy Communications Corp. (PRGY), which once was one of AOL's major competitors, caught DePorre's attention. He began dabbling in online message boards and chat rooms, gravitating toward forums catering to investment

#### Day Trader Earns Online Following

DePorre became a frequent participant on the Motley Fool, a popular investment site on AOL, quickly becoming known for his pointed criticism of the site's buy-and-hold investment philosophy.

Those remarks caught the eye of Herb Greenberg, then a columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle and a proprietor of the Biz Insider site on AOL. Though a critic of day trading, Greenberg, now a columnist for the online financial publication TheStreet.com was impressed with DePorre's postings and asked him to join the site.

"He was a guy who would write stuff on these chat boards that was very pointed and very funny and very articulate. You knew he was dealing with someone who was different, more articulate, more intelligent than the average message board poster," Greenberg said of DePorre, who is a member of Mensa, an organization for people with genius IQs. "It turned out that he had a very loyal following."

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That following stayed with DePorre when he spun Shark Attack into a separate site on AOL.

"He's well-respected," said Scott Slutsky, known as "LzzrdKing" on AOL, "On the message boards there will always be people who disagree with you. But he is generally well-respected."

Today, Shark Attack remains a "strong niche" site, said Tom Zimba, an AOL spokesman.

The online network declined to reveal how much traffic the site generates daily.

"We do see a very active and passionate group using the site," Zimba said. "There is steady group of core members who use it on a regular basis."

#### Hearing Impairment Eludes Online Audience

But what AOL considers a niche, DePorre considers his livelihood.

DePorre began actively trading online about five years ago, and now trades stocks through five online brokerage accounts, focusing on position plays in cheap, small-cap stocks, holding his shares for a day or two before selling.

For some time, few of his online minions even knew DePorre was deaf.

"I was surprised (when I found out) that he was deaf," said Floyd Schneider, a Shark Attack member.

Before an operation last year restored part of his hearing, DePorre depended on a trained border collie to alert him when faxes arrived at his office. His wife, whom he met on the Internet, occasionally translated for him using a home-made sign language. office did not have a phone.

These days his office includes a speaker phone. DePorre's assistant, however, has to occasionally pass him notes.

"My primary spokesman has been a computer for a long time," DePorre said.

Meanwhile, DePorre has expanded his online publishing interests. Under a joint venture with a fellow day trader, Joe Pistell, DePorre has launched a new Web site, Supertrades.com, that includes a chat "auditorium," large enough to fit hundreds of users, and an electronic news letter.

Much of his success, he admitted, is luck.

"I have never confused my ability to trade with great intellectual skill," DePorre said. "I realize there is a lot of luck. The minute you are infallible, you are in trouble."

Either way, the market's recent volatility has worked in his favor. DePorre claimed have netted an average of \$40,000 a week in trading profits in the months following the Oct. 6 market drop.

"It amazes me," DePorre said. "If I look back, I'll have a week where I will make as much money trading as I did in a year practicing law. I am amazed that I can do that."

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