

SMART IDEAS

Timed Travel

EVER BEEN TO A CITY WITH THOSE LOANER BICYCLES? WHAT IF A COMPANY RENTED AUTOMOBILES THAT WAY?

BY P. KELLY SMITH

WHAT: Rent cars by the hour
WHO: Robin Chase of Zipcar
WHERE: Cambridge, Massachusetts
WHEN: Started in 2000
WALLET: Projected \$1.5 million sales for 2001

A man looks around a parking lot, spots a green Volkswagen Bug, walks up to it and magically unlocks the door by placing a special card on the windshield. He slips in, and off he goes.

A high-tech car thief? No, just a Zipcar customer.

Robin Chase, 42, co-founded the car-sharing company in January 2000 and rolled out its unique member-based service six months later. Since then, the company's taken the Boston area by storm. It's no wonder: Members can use their rented cars for as long as they want—even if it's just an hour—as long as they return them to designated spots by the time indicated on their reservations. They can charge gas on their handy gas card (billed directly to Zipcar) and don't have to worry about insurance (it's taken care of with a refundable insurance security deposit).

"The only real criteria [for a potentially successful market] is that customers live in a densely populated area and don't need a car every day," Chase says.

Customers pay a \$25 application fee and a \$75 annual fee to become members. Once they're signed up,

rates are \$4.50 an hour and 40 cents a mile to use cars from a fleet that consists of Volkswagen Beetles, Golf Hatchbacks, Jettas and Passat Wagons.

Members can reserve the vehicles of their choice online as much as two months in advance. The most frequent time users reserve cars for is two to four hours. Zipcar charges all fees to the member's credit card at the end of each month.

The company's fan base is growing every day—600 members and 35 cars so far—and, at press time, Chase planned to open Zipcar in Washington, DC, by late spring.

Simply Ducky

WHAT: Ducks with famous faces
WHO: Craig Wolfe of Celebriducks
WHERE: San Rafael, California
WHEN: Started in 1998
WALLET: Projected \$1 million sales for 2001

Imagine swimming with Betty Boop, James Brown or the Three Stooges. Now bathers finally can, with Celebriducks (www.celebriducks.com), which sells a line of collectible rubber ducks resembling some of history's most famous faces.

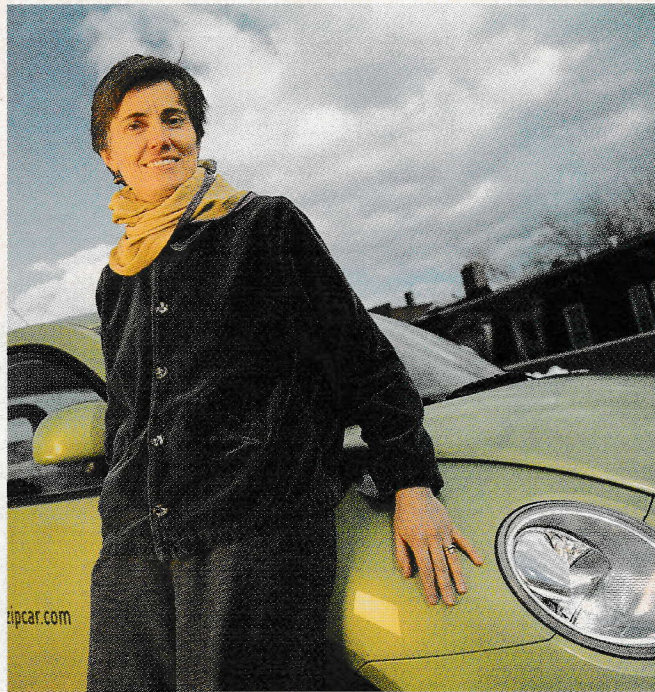
For Craig Wolfe, 48, the company's president and CEO, what began as an "amusing idea" in 1998 has become a very profitable company that had sales of \$500,000 in 2000, and Wolfe projects

it will double that return for 2001.

With a line of 21 ducks (all designed by his daughter, Rebecca, 27), Wolfe takes a lot of pride in the careful detail and artistry that goes into each of the ducks, which retail for \$9.99 on his Web site as well as in specialty gift stores and catalogs.

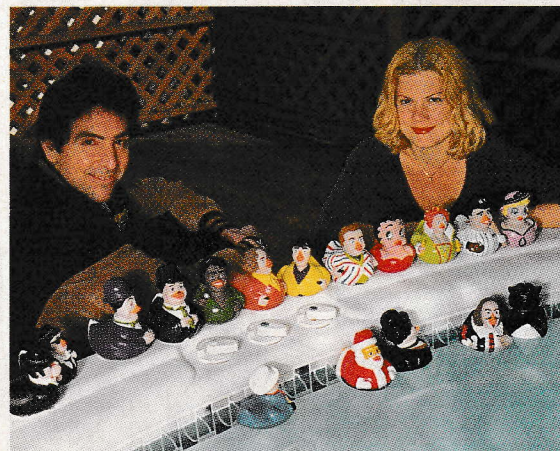
No plans for a Pokémon duck anytime soon, though; Celebriducks sticks with only classic characters—look for Ludwig van Beethoven, Carmen Miranda and Dracula as future offerings.

"The rubber duck's an American icon," Wolfe says. "We're just taking that idea and tweaking it." ■



ON EASY STREET:

Robin Chase gives drivers all the perks, but none of the hassles, of owning a car.



DUCK SOUP:

Craig Wolfe and his daughter, Rebecca, get Santa Claus and Groucho Marx in a hot tub together.