



NCTI 2009 Innovators Conference

The Future of Marketing of Assistive Technology

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Cheryl Volkman, Founder and CEO Emeritus, [AbleNet, Inc.](#)

Monday, November 16, 2009

Summary: This session shared business and marketing models, challenging existing models and ideas to engage larger markets.

Discussion

Cheryl Volkman

- Shared market research [AbleNet](#) did and the impact that it made and how it has impacted their work.
- About 10 years ago, AbleNet noticed a shift in their buyer population from the close caretaker/clinician to people farther removed from the child. Realized they didn't know that group of people- who is actually going to buy AbleNet products? Started developing curriculum that embedded AT. About then, NCLB shifted the conversation from IEPs to AYP and a mandate that purchases had to be evidence-based products.
- To find out about this new customer, conducted over 40 interviews with administrators around the country. Shared the interviews with NCTI so they could analyze the responses. From the analysis and experience, NCTI and AbleNet wrote [an article](#) and created a web-based decision support tool, [the Consumer Guide](#), that talks purchasers through the five key topics administrators told us they care about when purchasing technology:
 - Curriculum alignment
 - Implementation
 - Scientifically based evidence
 - Funding
 - Legislative Mandates
- What AbleNet did was recognize we had a new marketplace; we had to serve the districts. This drove us to ask what kind of solutions we could provide. Some of our responses have resulted in new partnerships:



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- Weekly Reader®, distribution to 35K classrooms; we now offer a subscription service so that special ed teacher can download appropriate materials to accompany the regular Weekly Reader edition
- Texas Instrument project to teach math to students with disabilities
- AbleNet Research Consortium which offers stipends to researchers
- Recognized that our marketing channels had to change. We made alliances to regular education technology vendors who can make connections for us and who are now selling AbleNet products. We've also changed our sales department; we assign a person to serve a district top to bottom.

Annuska Perkins

- Three main points in how the Accessibility Group thinks about marketing:
 1. Fostering innovation in the market for accessible technology
 2. Communicating with the community to promote accessibility
 3. Communicating with developers and product groups
- Some examples of the work Microsoft is doing to engage consumers and developers.
 - **Consumers**
 - Forrester Research commissioned by Microsoft found that 57% of adults can benefit from accessibility (74.2 M computer users in the U.S. have an impairment); also focused on the aging demographics. There are a range of accessibility needs, including
 - Traditional disabilities
 - Temporary condition
 - Customer preference
 - Look at scenarios and situations and how to position product or feature to a wider audience.
 - Marketing: web site has traditional resources; found that the videos are very moving and powerful.
 - Social networking: twittering to keep the conversation going.
 - Innovators Teacher Network: Microsoft hosting a forum for teachers to talk about the projects they are doing.
 - **Developers and Designers**



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- Focusing on:
 - Enabling better design
 - Putting up prototypes and beta versions
 - Participating in CodePlex, an open source of innovators
- Example was “Simple Loop” project- a simple idea that helps special ed kids and others control their mouse.

Alan Gershefeld

- Intro: formerly with Active Vision, a large game publisher; currently Chairman of Games for Change; currently managing partner of E Line Ventures which focuses on games and comics for learning, health, or youth empowerment message.
- Marketing – replace the term with publishing?
- Effective marketing starts at the earliest stages of planning a product. Publishers provide financing, selection, and managing developers, and are responsible for marketing and distribution – sustainability is often there at the beginning. Effective publishing mean you are going to need disciplined publishing methodologies and innovative public private partnerships. You need to think about:
 - Audience
 - Context (moderated or unmoderated? In or after school, library?) learning ecologies (when these can play off each other it can be very powerful)
 - Impact awareness, fundraising, learning, accessibility, real-world actions
 - Platform (console, download, handheld, PC, mobile)
 - Business models (financial expectations, revenue models; games as a product vs. game as a service – this is a mini-Internet business)
 - Design (organic alignment of what makes game fun and what makes game impactful)
 - Execution (right team, team-building, trouble shooting, marketing, distribution and support)
 - Assessment (new models such as real time and embedded assessment models, heuristic analysis – how do you build more paying customers?)



Discussion and Q&A

Question from Michael Levine: Is there an opportunity for using games to promote AT products?

- **Annuska Perkins:** Both casual games are part of how we think in the Accessibility Unit; Gary Moulton is a big proponent for using games to reach the aging audience.
- **Alan Gershenfeld:** on one level, applying game theory to learning is great; game currencies can drive behavior and behavior change; what is the market for adapting the mass market games?

Comment from Michael Levine: We are using the Muppets to drive behavior change – see the Healthy Habits initiative.

Question from Michael Levine: Tell us about the Research Consortium at AbleNet.

- **Cheryl Volkman:** We are encouraging graduate students who are doing research on our products to apply, we can give stipends; we also do national webinars for user input on our in development products.

Question from Michael Levine: Cost?

- **Annuska Perkins:** We do provide some AT for free, but there is third party software; we are doing a few things to try to drive the price down, such as through our AT group to keep the development process smooth for third parties; but to get to the question of long tail economy, there are more people who want a more seamless user interface without having to self identify as disabled. This is a challenge to provide those options.
- **Alan Gershenfeld:** What is the market opportunity? Where will the market fail? But where is the middle area? Check out the [community fab lab](#) running from MIT where local innovators can solve local problems with local inventors. It is a great solution.
- **Chuck Bergen:** we adapted Madden game and can sell it for \$49, but the home use adaptive hardware is another \$3000!! The hardware is so expensive.
 - **Question from Dave Malouf:** what is driving this cost?
 - **Chuck Bergen:** Lack of competition!

Question from John Williams to Cheryl Volkman: Do you see yourself as a company/business or as an innovator? We are missing the chance to get employers to recognize the disabled workers.

- **Cheryl Volkman:** We started as a cottage industry; we started in a niche and did it well, now we can reach out and grow; we are able to R&D with much less cost now using



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technology design; we are doing more in the durable medical goods internationally and that has given us a wider market.

- **Annuska Perkins:** We are definitely reaching beyond the special ed population and targeting AARP and other audiences, including ease of use; the more we can mainstream our features, the more support we can get from the larger team at Microsoft; also we are starting to work w security/privacy and risk.
- **Alan Gershenfeld:** I work for both for profit and non-profit; we are doing a lot of vetting of a few games that have a strong alignment on an x y axis of financial and social impact. You have to decide where you are. To address some analogous issues, we are jointly applying for proposals with foundations and non-profits; we are making the case for a market failings and gaps where subsidized development is needed.

Comment from Jennifer Broder: I'm using MS on screen keyboard because now you can make the keys bigger – just a simple thing like that!