



NCTI 2009 Innovators Conference

Podcast Interview

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Transcript

Nice to be here with you this morning Chauncey, thank you. When I was a panel presenter yesterday I talked about market research that AbleNet got involved in starting about 8 years ago, and how that led to us identifying a new market, which is an important part of marketing. You need to understand who your customer base is, what their needs are, and then developing product and marketing strategies to meet their needs, and that's really a great way to grow your company. And eight years ago what we did is we recognized that a lot of our great customers, which were individual teachers, clinicians, parents, were starting to say that they had a lot less money to spend, they only had a hundred dollars per classroom per child and as we developed curriculum to support students with significant disabilities in the classroom, we heard from teachers that they were not the ones that were able to purchase curriculum. So we started saying, "Well, who is that?" we started to understand that curriculum directors, special education directors were making broader decisions about the purchase and implementation of products because they wanted district-wide success and they wanted more consistency in the classrooms.

So we embarked on a research study a couple of years ago where we interviewed around forty administrators in the schools and we knew that that was more important because No Child Left Behind was making a big impact as well on accountability issues from a district prospective and they were looking at meeting the annual yearly progress and that was as important as it used to be meeting the individual education plan for teachers. So we interviewed administrators, superintendents, special education directors, curriculum directors, AT state-wide people, and program directors; we wrote up our notes and one day I was having lunch with Heidi Silver-Pacuilla and Tracy Gray, telling them about our research and they were very excited about it and offered to use the data that they had been collecting from their constituents on trends and to use a software package that would allow us to turn our qualitative data into more quantitative data, mix the interview information that we had been putting together along with theirs, and I worked with Cynthia Overton, who is also from the National Center for Technology Innovation. We analyzed the data and came up with five areas that we believed were the top priorities for the administrators.

The questions we asked them were "What are your top three priorities, what keeps you up at night?" We asked them what they thought their supervisor's top three priorities



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were, and then we said, “Based on those top priorities, why are they so important, what is it driving you to do and think about every day at work?” And then we asked them to talk about shifts and trends that they’ve seen over the last several years. So that was fascinating; we ended up with five significant areas, and that really directed AbleNet on future partnerships and I’ll talk about that in a minute, but the five areas were curriculum alignment, and that meant that if they were going to purchase assistive technology, they weren’t purchasing it just for one solution for one student. They really were looking for assistive technology as access to the curriculum so that the students could meet the ultimate standards, and that was perfect for us, we had been developing curriculum for quite a number of years, and we had embedded our assistive technology in the curriculum so that teachers would know how to use it to have access for students with all different types of disabilities that they would have in their classroom. So that was very exciting to us but it told us that we needed to speak to this customer base a little bit differently.

Implementation was the next one, we had a lot of administrators say that one of their biggest disappointments was when they made a huge investment in assistive technology and it would end up sitting on the shelf, it really didn’t get used, and so they were looking for manufacturers to really help with the implementation process. The next one was scientifically based evidence, and of course that is a very important expectation from No Child Left Behind, and from many other corners of the universe- that we want to be using equipment that has research base so that we can understand how to implement, how to use it how to replicate results. The next one was funding. We heard over and over again, not surprisingly, that they needed to meet more needs of students with much broader disability issues with the same or less money and so purchasing decisions were being made from a district level and that’s why there was less money available in the individual classrooms because people at a higher level were looking at what type of technology they could buy that could leverage and meet the needs of as many students as possible, as well as meeting the IEP at the same time.

And then the last one was legislative mandates and really understanding how No Child Left Behind was driving the accountability in the classroom, the accountability in the school and in the district- what that really meant to them and how their purchase decisions were being made as a result of that. So that was a really interesting process that we went through and really understood, and so Cynthia Overton, Heidi Silver-Pacuilla and I wrote an article that was published in the “Assistive Technology: Outcomes and Benefits” journal, and that allowed us to put together research base, we, on the protocol that we used, the software protocol that we used to analyze the data, which was a very important thing to do, it helped us identify and pull out the key words



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and key phrases that were being used by the people that we interviewed as well as by the constituents in the reports that NCTI had put together, so we had a high confidence that this was indeed a big need. And we also, as a result of the article we put together a- what's called a consumer guide, and that's on the NCTI website, and there's also a link to the article on the website.

The consumer guide has on one side of the sheet questions that administrators can ask at every single one of those five areas, questions that they can ask the manufacturers and vendors to help them understand how their products or curriculum do align with those key issues that they're trying to address in their districts, and on the other side of the sheet it has the same five areas and it's the questions that manufacturers can ask administrators to make sure that they're understanding the needs the best they can so that they can recommend equipment that will best meet the needs. So those steps were important, we also did a webinar and there were more people involved from around the country in the administrative roles and that helped to verify that the issues we were talking about were indeed critical. So as a result of the research it impacted the decisions that AbleNet has made.

First of all we did identify that we had a new market, and that really is the whole administration. So a couple of things that we did, I'm just going to quick give you an example of a product that we put together because we recognized that the curriculums that we were developing needed to align with the alternate standards and that there's a lot of curriculum and content that's being taught in regular education and we wanted to develop partnerships with regular ed providers, and adapt so that the students that we were serving were providing the same types of materials as the regular ed students were learning, so the partnership that we put together was with Weekly Reader, who has been providing really great content to support the achievement of standards for 35 years, I might be wrong about that it might be a lot more years than that, and so when a special education teacher purchases the Weekly Reader subscription from us, they will get the same Weekly Reader magazines as all regular ed teachers get. And then in addition they can go on the internet and they can download how we have adapted the content for a special education teacher to teach the content to a student who has severe profound cognitive disabilities, or moderate, or mild, or has autism issues, and we also have embedded then, in that content, how to use assistive technology for actions that a special ed student might not be able to take. So for instance, if you have an action in the Weekly Reader where a student needs to say something and they have no voice, it would give the script on what to put into a step-by-step product, a single message, or any type of communication device, just so that the teachers have content that they can quickly plug and play in their classroom, so that the students have a really



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great chance of learning the content. We also put together a software package that supports the district in pulling together and recording student information systems in the same way that they do with regular education. It allows them to track goals, for teachers to be able to track measurement progress, it allows them to record data so that they don't just have to just record it on post-it notes and carry that around, and that particular software package does align with software packages that they're also using for regular education, so that's another example.

And then, finally just to give a couple of examples around how it affected our marketing; we realized then that we needed to be selling to curriculum directors and to special education directors and special education directors rely on their team of people that is understanding the needs in the schools and making recommendations to that director. So we developed relationships with manufacturers, reps, independent reps, that have been selling curriculum to regular education for many, many years, and allowed them to sell packages of our curriculum and product to those same people for special education. And so we developed a partnership, helped them understand what the needs of special education were, and we've developed really strong relationships to help support the district at that level. And we also find ourselves going to, made decisions to go to many different types of conferences. The conferences that we go to now aren't just to sell a product but to help understand what the needs of special education directors are, curriculum directors are, and after a couple of years of doing that, now that we have a lot more products to support them, we are showing at many, many more shows. So that's it in a nutshell.