

FRONT AND CENTER

LiquidTalk makes solid gains

Application aims to boost productivity, give greater access to digital content

BY WAILIN WONG

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Dave Peak remembers the date he thought of the idea for his technology start-up: Oct. 23, 2005. He was stuck on the Dan Ryan and sick of listening to National Public Radio.

Peak began thinking of how to "apply iPods to the business world," or tapping into people's familiarity with consumer digital content like music and videos to increase mobile workers' productivity. When he told his wife his idea, she suggested he enter the University of Chicago's New Venture Challenge, a competition that pairs business school students with entrepreneurs to design business plans.

Peak, 42, spent Saturdays with his student team to prepare for the 2006 challenge, which culminated in May of that year. The LiquidTalk concept didn't win the cash prize, but he had a plan for a new business and began reaching out to potential clients.

Peak signed his first customer, a pharmaceutical firm, at the end of 2006 and scored \$2.5 million in venture capital funding in early 2007.

Another major breakthrough came last week, when LiquidTalk unveiled an agreement with Research in Motion Ltd. and launched software for its multimedia-enabled BlackBerry devices. Financial terms were not disclosed, but the deal gives LiquidTalk technical and marketing support to put its application on the smart phones.

LiquidTalk uses a Web-based portal that organizes content in a playlist format. Workers on the road, for example, can access audiovisual content like tutorials and podcasts on their mobile device. Employees can catch up on recorded training sessions while stranded at an airport, or technicians can view step-by-step video guides while they're making service calls. LiquidTalk users can also take content with them to use in presentations. The company's first client used LiquidTalk software to put video testimonials on iPods that could be played during sales pitches.

Content tries to keep up

Tyler Lessard, who oversees partnerships with independent software vendors at RIM, said LiquidTalk's software meets an increasing need for smart-phone applications that go beyond e-mail.

"We've certainly seen a growing demand from our corporate customer base for interesting ways to leverage the multimedia capabilities on the newer devices," Lessard said.

Lessard said that as more workers use the multimedia features on their smart phones, businesses must be savvier in the kind of content they're creating. A video of a presentation might not work on a mobile device if text ends up tiny and unreadable, for example.

(cont.)

Further ahead, mobile workers could use their devices to create their own content. Lessard cited the real estate business where "folks are out in the field and need to capture an image. They can add a caption and send it back over the wireless network to the head office to have that report or video uploaded."

Peak said LiquidTalk also wants to get its software onto the Palm line of smart phones and expand to all of the major manufacturers. RIM remains the leader in this segment. According to research firm IDC, RIM had 45 percent of the U.S. market for mobile devices that run high-level operating systems in 2007. Palm was ranked second, with 15 percent, while Apple captured 11 percent with just a half-year of iPhone sales.

Chicago vs. the Valley

Peak and his co-founder, Dan Anderson, are dot-com survivors who form part of Chicago's burgeoning start-up community. The two former Silicon Valley residents passed on the opportunity to base LiquidTalk on the West Coast.

"We consciously chose to build in Chicago on the belief that the tighter community and [its] resurgence ... would increase our odds of being successful," Peak said.

LiquidTalk leased cheap office space from the Illinois Institute of Technology, which houses several other start-ups on its campus just a quarter mile from where Peak was jammed on the Dan Ryan more than two years ago. The company's programmers are based in Ukraine and China, but Peak said he would like to eventually reach out to IIT students and local engineering talent.

"The reality is that we would love to hire locally, and as we get bigger, we will," he said.

For Peak, LiquidTalk has returned him to his entrepreneurial roots after feeling "pretty jaded" from his Silicon Valley days.

"We learned a ton about how to successfully launch a start-up" during the dot-com boom, he said. "We discovered how fun it is to come together as a team and build something that's never been done. It's intoxicating."
