



CHANNEL NEWSASIA

From bright idea to business: the challenge of bringing new tech to the market

In the seventh part of a special series looking at Singapore's burgeoning start-up scene, Michael Stoss of technology start-up Voice2Choice describes the challenges of developing new technology to the point where it can be brought to the market.

By Lianne Chia

Posted 20 May 2016 08:59



Founder and CEO of Voice2Choice Michael Stoss (Photo: Lianne Chia)

SINGAPORE: It all started with soft toys and bedtime stories.

It was 2007, and Mr Michael Stoss was working in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He wanted to tell bedtime stories to his young godson back in Germany, but due to the time difference, it was very challenging to do so.

“One day it came to my mind, is there a way to transform the voice of the original speaker of an audiobook of bedtime stories or fairy tales, into my voice? And I found out there was no software solution outside to do that.”



CHANNEL NEWSASIA

He soon thought of another possible application: to create soft toys for hospitalized children that could speak in the voices of parents and grandparents. “Children who are ill in hospitals only have their familiar soft toy for comfort, but when the soft toy can speak in a familiar voice, it could speed up the recovery process.”

Mr Stoss started to develop the software, and that was how his technology start-up, Voice2Choice, was born.

TREMENDOUS POTENTIAL

Going beyond bedtime stories and soft toys, however, Mr Stoss soon realised the software had tremendous potential in other areas.

Movie dubbing, he said, was one of them. “Almost all the movies and television shows we have in Germany are dubbed by voice actors. You have a lot of characters in the movie, for example you have 20. So for movie dubbing, you need 20 dubbing speakers. With our technology, you don’t need so many.”

“You just need three: a man, a woman and a child. And with these three, we can create the (voices) for the other characters too. This would save the movie companies a lot of time and money.”

It would be the same case in the gaming industry, too. “With our technology, we can provide the game producers more variation with voices.”

STUMBLING BLOCKS

But ideas and theories can only take a product so far in the journey towards making money. And this is where external agencies can provide assistance.

For Voice2Choice, Singapore has offered a helping hand from a number of sources. The company is benefiting from the T-UP scheme by the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR). As part of the scheme, A*STAR research scientists and engineers are seconded to small and medium enterprises, with partial funding provided for their salaries. It has also received the Technology Enterprise Commercialisation Scheme grant from SPRING Singapore.

In the private sector, Mr Stoss said the software is currently undergoing trials with media and video game companies. Voice2Choice is also being supported by Mediacorp’s Mediapreneur programme, which provides start-ups with seed funding, a working space, mentoring, networking opportunities and attractive media packages to speed up their growth and development.

“We believe as a small, tech start-up company, to have these big players like the government and Singapore’s largest media company behind us, this shows a lot of trust when we go out to find investors and more business partners,” said Mr Stoss.



CHANNEL NEWSASIA

But there are stumbling blocks.

Almost 10 years down the road, Mr Stoss's dream of giving his godson audiobook bedtime stories with his voice has not yet come to fruition.

The primary challenge they face lies in the technology itself. "The voice is complex, it is unique, and it's like a fingerprint," he said. "Things like intonation, rhythm, accents and pronunciation...these are the things I cannot change."

"I cannot change a Scottish or Australian accent and make the person sound like he's speaking Singlish."

He added that with the existing technology, pitch could be another problem, as there is a limited possibility of making very deep voices sound high-pitched.

The company also needs investors, but Mr Stoss said this is another challenge they face. "Investors want to see revenue, but we are still developing our technology to get a better result."

To overcome this, Voice2Choice is expending most of its energies on research.

"There are a lot of parameters which describe the human voice, and a lot of these parameters are not well researched. So we have to do a lot of research in that area," said Mr Stoss.

"We need experts in very technical fields, like digital signal processing. They are limited, which means that when you find them, they are very expensive," he added. "As a start-up, it's challenging."

Also in the pipeline are ways to let users try out their technology for themselves. "We want to develop a mobile application, and a platform where users can upload their voices and create their own voice sounds," he added.

"These are two possibilities we are thinking of to address (the challenge of) investors, so we can go back to them and show them that our technology is working and it's out in the market."

Voice2Choice is being supported by Mediacorp's incubator programme, the Mediapreneur (<http://www16.mediacorp.sg/themediapreneur/>).

<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/business/singapore/from-bright-idea-to/2796484.html>