

PRICELESS SOLUTIONS

Companies put profits on hold to meet new challenges

For Mary Gifford, the word that students would be turning their homes into classrooms as the pandemic took hold raised a number of questions, such as how long this change in venue would last. “Is it going to be a month? Is it going to be two months? Is it going to be the balance of the school year?” she wondered.

She wasn’t asking as a parent but as the head of one of a number of Arizona-based education technology companies with the same question: How can we help?

What made their responses more remarkable was they opted to offer their products at no cost. No strings yet no stripped-down versions either. “It comes down to our mission is to help students and educators succeed,” says Ron Robertson, CEO and co-founder of Tempe-based Picmonic.

The companies recognized students and schools desperately needed solutions—and they needed them fast. “What we started seeing right away,” says Gifford, president of Chandler-based StrongMind, “was a lot more like crisis remote learning rather than comprehensive online learning.” To meet that goal, StrongMind stepped forward to offer its premium products. “I knew that a lot of schools would not be in the position to invest in anything during a school year that ended up in much uncertainty,” she says. “And so that’s why I knew it needed to be free.”

“We determined that providing our software at no cost to interested schools, teachers and parents was the best way for us to help with the challenges that were facing our educators,” says Lori Hershman, director of operations at Scottsdale-based Adaptive Curriculum. “Our decision was based on the fact that it was the right thing to do to support education.”

The plus for the three companies was already having a variety of products on the shelf to help a variety of audiences. (See related story.) For Picmonic, its decision was an extension of already serving students pursuing careers in medical, nursing, pharmacy and related fields—all segments heavily involved in tackling COVID-19. “Being health-care focused and being with everything that’s happened (with the pandemic), it was just really a no-brainer for us,” Robertson says of the immediate connection with students as others were trying to find new ways to teach remotely.



With most of Adaptive Curriculum's team comprised of ex-educators, the company already was providing online access to standards-aligned, interactive middle and high school math and science content that lets teachers create assignments for students, track their progress and conduct online activity-specific assessment, Hershman says. Students also have the ability to search over 1,000 activities in the content library and complete activities that interest them.

But now the company also realizes its product solution and delivery works in a wide variety of implementations, which is needed during this time.

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"It provides a flexible solution for teachers, whether they are having the student complete their assignment independently or when presenting a concept to a group of students using the activity in a presentation model" such as Zoom, she says.

For users familiar with learning online, StrongMind was ideal. "It's pretty much add water and stir," Gifford says. "It's not very complicated to get up and running." But finding some potential users were new to this type of instruction started her team thinking to make things more turnkey, so a quick start kit to get going in three days is in the works. "We had districts reaching out to us for our free offering that didn't have a learning management system of their own," Gifford says. "They never thought about a learning management system."

Robertson says existing and new students have come to appreciate Picmonic's fun and effective approach to learning by watching an interactive, two-minute video on a variety of topics then following it up with a quick quiz. But over the past few months, it became a question of how to give educators visibility into student performance, so product developers have been building out more robust analytics dashboards to track student progress.

Adaptive Curriculum

With math and science curriculum aligned to state and national standards, the company's Activity Objects engage digital learners in grades 6 through 12 by integrating real-world scenarios, cutting-edge graphics, animations, 3D models, as well as interactive simulations, into active learning. Although free access has ended, the company has created a home version called AC Home to support parents and homeschool situations while providing the same content and instruction management interface as the school solution. In addition, Adaptive Curriculum is in the final stages of releasing a 2020 upgrade that operates on numerous devices.

While the companies learn more about their products' capabilities, their employees also are finding out more about their own potential. While Picmonic's team is accustomed to working remotely, so there was no need to make major adjustments to management from an operational perspective, "we're always impressed at how quick they can adapt and change strategy during the challenging times," Robertson says.

"I believe that we all learned how important it is to think outside of the box and to do the right thing within our community, to understand that we can be a resource and have a positive impact on education," Hershman says, "that it isn't always about the sale but more about understanding a challenge and finding a solution."

That certainly is happening at StrongMind. Some team members are heading back to school not just to show teachers how to use the products but to find ways to help them keep students engaged in new virtual settings. "We're finding that these conversations aren't just about products," Gifford says. "They're about solutions right now."

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Picmonic

Its app's bite-sized, picture-mnemonic video lessons help increase student engagement and supplement existing curriculum. The app makes it easier for health care students to remember "hard to recall" facts, and has helped them prepare for classes, improve grades and increase board/licensing exam scores. After launching Picmonic for Medicine, the product line was expanded to include material covering nursing school courses, and courses for physician assistant, pharmacy, paramedic, occupational therapy, physical therapy and pre-health students, as well as an introductory medical terminology course. More than 730,000 students have used the learning system since the company was founded by medical students in 2013.

Count on more solutions coming from Arizona's education technology sector. Some of that stems from deep experience in the field. For example, Gifford, a former executive at K12, now works at a company founded by CEO Damian Creamer, also the founder of Primavera Online High School.

Add to that the homegrown talent coming from institutions such as Arizona State University, home of the Learning Design and Technologies program at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. "Others are recognizing that is a great place for people who do really great digital work, as well as your straight-up engineers," Gifford says.

Adaptive Curriculum also recognizes the array of contributions that the university is making in the education technology field. "We are fortunate to have an outstanding partnership with ASU, creating content with the guidance and involvement of their subject matter experts," Hershman says.



StrongMind

Award-winning, robust middle and high school curriculum supports core, honors and elective courses for 6th through 12th grade students no matter where they are in their journey. Project-based activities promote collaboration while insightful class and student level reports are delivered for assessments. The courseware is designed to work within learning management systems already in use and optimized for Canvas and Agilix Buzz. It also provides online courses to schools without existing programs, which has been the case among smaller, rural districts left with few alternatives when their classrooms have been forced to close due to the pandemic.

ASU is just one of what Robertson calls "phenomenal" education institutions that are producing new talent. He says another member of that community is Grand Canyon University, as well as some of the community college programs.

Robertson says there are a number of pluses for education technology companies doing business in his home state.

"From an entrepreneurial perspective, it is a phenomenal community. Our ecosystem is a very generous community," he says. "I wholeheartedly believe there are more great people and businesses trying to help others succeed, trying to help each other through tough times unlike anywhere else." ■