Three lessons from Crowdbeamer on how to market a product rapidly

A beamer in your pocket

Roryco, the start-up company from Edegem (near Antwerp, Belgium), wants to change the way people hold meetings and presentations. Its first products have been sold, production starts shortly and fresh capital is available as of March.

Translation from a Dutch text by Benny Debruyne;
photograph by Dieter Telemans

Picture yourself during a presentation, getting a crick in your neck because a column partially obscures your view of the screen. To make matters worse, the letters are just a little too small to read comfortably. Suddenly you see an interesting graph. You dive for your smartphone in order to make a photo before the speaker skips to the next slide. Or you are holding an improvised meeting at the airport but find it difficult to show your presentation to the audience. On top of that, you have to forward them all videos and slides afterwards – even more work on your plate.

These are the types of problems the one-year old Roryco wants to solve with its Crowdbeamer. The product has a hardware and a software component. The hardware consists of a little case measuring approximately ten by fifteen centimetres, crammed with electronics, that can fit into your pocket. The person giving the presentation connects the Crowdbeamer to his computer or smartphone with a cable. The Crowdbeamer then goes on to create a Wi-Fi network within a range of 30 metres.

The software is an app, which the audience can install on their PC, tablet of smartphone. Thus they can see the speaker's screen presentation on their own appliance immediately and can store, annotate or share the graphs, images, videos or other information. The version with an internal antenna has a range of 30 metres, which suffices for spaces with 200 seats. The version with an external antenna is meant for larger groups and spaces.

Since the Crowdbeamer also operates on batteries, auditoria really become superfluous. You can just as well give a presentation outside in a park, with the audience following everything on their own appliance. Crowdbeamer is not the only company developing technology to make meetings more efficient. The Kortrijk company Barco invented ClickShare, a small appliance enabling different people to take over from the large screen with a wireless connection during a presentation. Other start-ups are also entering the meeting and presentation market (see box *Presentation software from Belgian start-ups).*

Peter Ryckaert set up Roryco together with Hans Romaen. Ryckaert was voted Flemish Young Entrepreneur in 2006 and founded the ICT company Digipoint in 1997. The university-trained engineer sold his company, which then had 50 employees, to Cegeka in 2011. Civil engineer Hans Romaen was director of several engineering associations and the driving force behind the 'job trains' traversing Flanders to introduce engineering students to potential employers. All of those years of business experience ensured that the two avoided a prime classic entrepreneurial mistake: tinkering with the technology for months or even years on end before going to market, only to discover that the customer prefers something different. They involved their target customer group from the very beginning.

1.   Develop your product together with your users

"Crowdbeamer was developed following a market analysis", according to Hans Romaen. "100 to 150 lawyers, economists, managers and professors from our network registered their experiences for one and a half years in the course of their business trips." On the basis of these insights and a market analysis, they could set out the appliance's development. This involved piecing together existing technology, a.o. from the satellite sector, to form a new product. The appliance was tested in the Ghent testing laboratory of the Flemish research institute iMinds, so that they could gauge how the technology performed when used by ten to a hundred people.

2.   Involve experts to ensure speedy development

In order to implement users' feedback in their product, Roryco needs a flexible structure. The two partners have no employees themselves, but work with a network of freelancers who are experts in their field and who are scattered across Europe.

That was a lesson Ryckaert learned when he set up Digipoint. "I founded Digipoint with very young people. All very well, but it led to a loss of time because we had to train them first. With Crowdbeamer we also sometimes work with young people, for example for the online marketing, but they are experts in their domain and do not have to be trained."

3. Start selling before manufacturing has started

In spite of the fact that production is only due to start in a few weeks' time, Roryco has already sold 37 appliances. A Crowdbeamer costs 800 tot 900 Euros. "Due to prior sales we can keep in touch with the market and gather sales momentum slowly", explains Hans Romaen.

Crowdbeamer will be introduced onto the home markets in Belgium and the Netherlands at the end of May. The business plan targets sales of 75.000 appliances in four years in Europe and the USA. "We need to turn over a large volume", adds Peter Ryckaert.   The company is directing its sales pitch at self-employed consultants as well as large firms and conference centres.

In order to give impetus to sales and growth, Roryco hopes to round off discussions with investors in March and to raise one and a half to two million Euros. The founders, friends and family have already invested a total of 360.000 Euros in the firm. In fact, the founders have given themselves four years to turn Crowbeamer into a success story, and then hope to sell the company. "We believe that in the long run, this product should find a safe haven in a large, international group with strong distribution channels, with an even better knowledge of the market than we have."

(Box)

Presentation software from Belgian start-ups

Crowdbeamer is not the only technology developed by a starter to enhance meetings and presentations. Here are three other examples.

Brussels' **PresMaster** is an online tool with which people can practise their presentation in front of their computer screens. The user receives personal feedback regarding content, structure, execution and the impact of the speech.

Also from Brussels is **Wooclap**, which created a software service for the public to answer the speaker's questions during a conference or seminar. This enables speakers to make their presentations more dynamic.

The Antwerp company **TheLearnScape** developed its product sCool for schools. It is a 'Facebook for children', a social platform where children can a.o. share videos and chat, yet also includes a built-in camera that is connected to the blackboard, allowing sick children to follow the lesson from home.

(Photo caption)

Hans Romaen (left) and Peter Ryckaert. Giving a presentation is considerably easier with the Crowdbeamer.