

Inventor getting big recognition

New York Times Magazine calls ToneCheck one of 2010's best

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Matt Eldridge

Photograph by: submitted, for the TIMES

In just under two years Matt Eldridge has taken a personal frustration with e-mail miscommunication and turned it into an award-winning business attracting international attention.

The 33-year-old Sardis secondary graduate is the co-founder and CEO of Lymbix Inc., a high-tech Moncton, N.B.-based company that developed ToneCheck, a software program that scans e-mail and flags words that might convey the wrong emotion or tone before the author hits send.

Last month the New York Times Magazine named the product one of the most innovative ideas of 2010.

"We were all pretty pumped," said Eldridge.

His brainchild, often called the "emotional spell-checker," was one of 28 ideas picked by the Times and one of four featured on the magazine's hard-copy cover along with singer Lady Gaga's raw-meat dress (worn as a human rights statement) and basketball star LeBron James's reality TV show about his decision to sign with the Miami Heat.

"At first we didn't really understand the magnitude of just how big this innovative ideas for 2010 was," said Eldridge. "It's obviously now kind of hit home because we're getting a lot of continued press, and obviously it's filling our sales pipeline for ToneCheck."

The media attention validates the need for his product, Eldridge said.

He came up with the idea when he was struggling with his own e-mail headaches.

In an earlier venture as a franchise salesman, he was good at closing deals in person, but over e-mail he came across as pushy and aggressive when he was really trying to convey enthusiasm.

"I really just wanted to scratch my own itch," said Eldridge of his innovation. "I had my own issues with tone in e-mail and losing deals."

After researching the idea, he teamed up with Lymbix co-founder and chief technical officer Josh Merchant.

"He's just absolutely brilliant when it comes to all the tech," said Eldridge, who said he represents the business side of the enterprise.

ToneCheck scans each email and cross-references the words and phrases against a massive database of words, phrases, emoticons and punctuation. When it finds a sentence that might convey more negative or even positive emotion than the sender might have intended, it flags it.

After its launch in July, the product drew a lot of media attention even before being featured in the New York Times Magazine.

And in November, the company got the backing of computer giant Microsoft, who invited Lymbix into their BizSpark One program, which helps grow high-potential startup businesses.

Lymbix is only the fourth Canadian company to be enrolled in the program since its inception.

A beta version of ToneCheck has been available for Microsoft Outlook users since July, but Eldridge says a faster, lighter and easier-to-use version will be ready for launch in February.

The individual-use e-mail plug-in will pave the way for the company's next product, ToneFilter, a program designed to help companies control the tone of all the e-mail coming in and going out of the organization by monitoring employee e-mail communication.

While Eldridge is thrilled with his company's success, he is not surprised that his idea has taken off.

He estimates the world sends 210 billion e-mails each day, so the possibility of miscommunication is nearly endless.

"It's a big problem and it's continuing to grow because of all the text-based communication that's happening through Twitter or through e-mail or through chat," he said.

Needless to say, the folks at home in Chilliwack are thrilled by the success of their son's business, which now employs 23 people and occupies prime real estate in downtown Moncton.

"We are very proud of his accomplishments, both personally and professionally," said Eldridge's mom, Christine in an e-mail to the Times.

Eldridge, a self-taught businessman, chose to learn his skills on the job after graduating from Sardis secondary in 1996 rather than pursuing post-secondary education.

One thing his street smarts have taught him (and ToneCheck has proven) is the value of a good idea.

"It's all about solving a real-world problem," he said. "If you can solve that problem in a very simple way that people get, that's half the battle."