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BCIT launches medical devices initiative

New office aims to feed the commercialization pipeline

GLENN DREXHAGE

Finding markets for medical and assistive devices is the first step for an office set up to capitalize on tech research at the **British Columbia Institute of Technology**.

BCIT recently announced its new Technology Commercialization Office, headed by director **Matthew Mintz**.

The idea is to move research beyond the lab and tap into its commercial possibilities.

"There's great technical expertise. But in terms of transforming those innovative products into products on the market, there has been a gap," said Mintz, noting that this is an issue across Canada.

Now, he's aiming to bridge that break. "My vision for the office is to create a place where great technologies are packaged for commercial development in new or existing enterprises, and to be a portal for industry to interact with BCIT faculty and students in applied research," Mintz said.

"I think it's a great idea," said **Clay Braziller**, a director at the **British Columbia Medical Device Industry Association** and a *BIV* columnist. "Often their professors are much closer to a product that's commercializable than a pure research organization."

Mintz, too, highlighted the tasks involved in moving research forward. "The challenge is really to make sure that the product technology addresses an identifiable need in the market and it's not developed for the sake of technology itself."

The office has put forward an application for a budget of several hundred thousand dollars.

In addition, a grant from **Western Economic Diversification Canada** totals \$340,000 over three years.

One of the devices that the Technology Commercialization Office is currently involved with is a manual patient lift that doesn't require electricity – thereby lowering its cost – for people with mobility difficulties.

Another tool allows patients to crush pills into powder for ingestion with little effort.

Braziller – also the president of **Cientis Technologies**, a health-care tech consulting firm –

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Beam me up: Edward Mintz with a device that lifts patients without using electricity



DOMINIC SCHAEFER

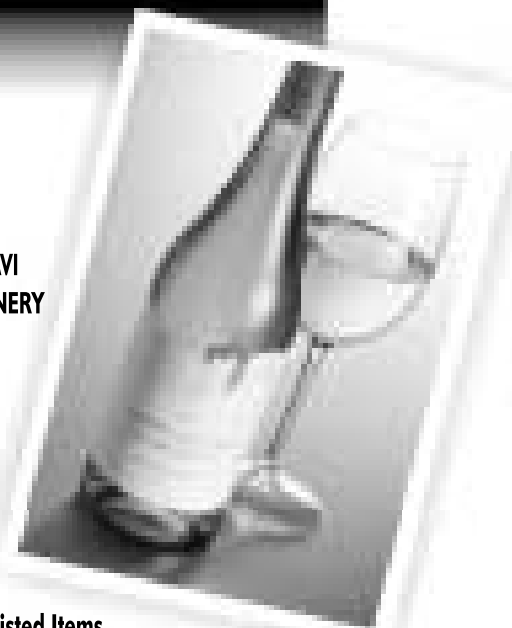
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Blogging tests boundaries of product placement

Local software developer breaks new marketing ground by paying bloggers

GLENN DREXHAGE

A local software company's latest online foray is pushing the marketing envelope, as its cash-for-coverage approach attracts controversy and debate – as well as valuable attention.

At the beginning of December 2004, Vancouver's **Marqui Inc.** announced a program that would see the software company pay a group of bloggers to write about Marqui.

Blogs – tech slang for Web logs – are online diaries where the authors (bloggers) write about subjects they feel passionately about, ranging from technology to music to politics.

Lately, blogs have been gaining value among online viewers who consider them an undiluted, opinionated alternative to a homogenized mass media.

Marqui has adopted a marketing strategy whereby it pays about 20 bloggers, mainly from the U.S., to give Marqui some coverage in their blogs. The

company, which has 28 employees, offers communications management software by subscription. The software is aimed at marketing professionals and promises to help them manage communications and branding across a range of media.

Marqui pays bloggers US\$800 a month, and each blogger has a three-month contract. **Stephen King**, Marqui's president and CEO, said his company intends to spend about US\$180,000 on its blogging strategy this year.

"I think every company is looking for that creative idea," King said. "Using the blogosphere is kind of our equivalent of putting soaps in hotel rooms."

One advertising insider sees sponsored blogs as a natural extension of a broader trend. "If this sort of initial experiment works, I would expect to see more of it," said **Rick Sanderson**, media director for **TBWA\ Vancouver**. "Product placement appears to be on the rise in all media, and so it's not

really a big surprise that someone's looking for a way to make it happen on the Internet."

The paid bloggers are required to write about Marqui once a week, and their sites need to indicate that they're being paid. Writers are paid for the duration of contracts, regardless of positive or negative coverage. "It was very important for us to participate in a way that protected... the integrity of the blogosphere," King said.

That may be, but not everyone is enamoured with the payment-for-blogging approach. **Jason Calacanis**, co-founder of U.S. company **Weblogs Inc.**, posted a response on his own website (it also appears on Marqui's site, along with other views).

"Blogging has become a force because of the unfiltered, honest nature of the medium," Calacanis writes. "To take money to blog about something – and disclose it or not – works against the public's expectation that blogs are, first and foremost, up-front and honest."



RICHARD LAM

Product placement: Stephen King compares online product placement to putting branded soaps in hotel rooms

King acknowledged that there was the danger of a backlash against Marqui, and agreed on the importance of being up-front and honest. He noted that was why all Marqui's bloggers clearly disclose their arrangements with the company. "We're not trying to fool anybody," he said.

So far, King noted, the blogging strategy has gone "remarkably well," resulting in media coverage and business leads that he said climbed to about 250 in December, up from 10 or 20 the previous month.

It's still early to determine the quality of those leads and the value of the blogging contribution, but King remains bullish.

"It's a beautiful thing," he said, predicting that blogs will develop into a valuable marketing medium for all sorts of com-

panies. "I think PR agencies in particular are going to have to reinvent themselves to deal with these future technologies."

"I applaud anyone looking for new and interesting ways to use the Internet, which is after all a new and interesting medium," Sanderson said. Yet he had some reservations, such as the difficulty of controlling the timing of a message's impact. For instance, an agency placing an ad on a TV news show will have a fairly accurate idea of how many people will tune in.

Sanderson, however, noted that on a blog, it's not known how many people will view an item or when. And it's also unknown who or where the viewers are. "There's no control over those two factors, either," he said. ■



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Devices: the push to market

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highlighted the worldwide need for assistive technologies.

"The number of people who are becoming in need of an assistive device because of age or Parkinson's or MS is growing every year," he said.

In addition, the new office aims to expand its coverage, encompassing the range of BCIT's research and development programs.

It's already involved in other areas, such as Internet security and green-roof technology, the latter involving a "living layer" – such as plants – that serves as an insulator and controls water run-off.

Braziller is hoping the office can pursue the burgeoning space of energy technology.

"The solar market is growing at 30 per cent per year globally. And B.C. plays such a small part in it," he said.

Although the commercialization of research is also pursued at other institutions such as the **University of B.C.**, **Simon Fraser University** and the **University of Victoria**, Braziller said the various efforts are complementary. "There's so many people out there to go and license the technology to."

Indeed, Mintz noted that the industry liaison offices at those universities have provided the Technology Commercialization Office with "tremendous support and insight."

Mintz, 40, is the office's sole staff member for now, although he hopes to have a handful of others on board in the next six to 12 months.

His goals include setting up a framework that invites industry and encourages faculty to engage in applied research.

"Beyond that, I'd also like to see at least two technologies find a commercial home," he said. "And we're on track to do that."

His previous experience should come in handy. Before coming on board at BCIT, Mintz operated **Mintz & Associates**, a consulting firm with offices in Vancouver and San Diego that helps life science companies looking at Asian opportunities and helps Asian firms tap into North American markets.

Mintz, an American, remains involved with the firm in a limited capacity.

Previously, he was a director of marketing, Asia-Pacific for Vancouver biotech **QLT Inc.** ■

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