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Making history in the classroom

MB company emerged from social studies teachers' high-tech techniques

By Jasmin Persch

Daily Breeze

few years ago, two social studies teachers found a way to motivate unruly inner-city teenagers with technology.

Today, teachers worldwide have bought into their approach.

Herschel Sarnoff and Dana Bagdasarian developed their teaching technique at Jordan High School in Watts. They shared it with other instructors in 2004 when they started a Manhattan Beach-based company called Multimedia Learning.

The company continued designing educational PowerPoint presentations, which contain montages of text, photos, charts, maps and audio and video links. They now span the entire curriculum of U.S. history from elementary to high school and have themes like the Great Depression. By December, Multimedia plans to have made 35 presentations on historical subjects.

In those presentations, one slide links to one of the best-known songs of that time, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" Others bear old photos of homeless camps, where white immigrant farmworkers lived; and a color-coded U.S. map that shows the Democrats routed the Republicans in the 1936 presidential race.

"I wouldn't want to stop using them," Bagdasarian said. "The way children respond -- they're interested, they ask questions."

A growing number of teachers and schools also believe they work. Last year, the company's sales shot up 200 percent, and it had an estimated 40 percent profit margin.

The teaching kits, which include lesson plans, exams and the presentations, have reached teachers and schools in every U.S. state and in several other countries through a catalog that advertises teaching aids, said Aaron Willis, who manages sellers and content for Culver City-based Social Studies School Service.

The company buys the kits from Multimedia Learning at wholesale and sells them at marked-up prices.

"It is one of the best selling in the catalog," Willis said.

A recent campaign by the Bush administration to improve the teaching of U.S. history helped the company's success, he said. It gave schools that received part of the almost \$100 million in federal grants enough money to buy them.

Also, more teachers are looking for new ways to instruct because today they have a tougher time holding their students' attention.

The traditional method of the "authoritarian" teacher lecturing in front of the class is ineffective with generations who grew up with entertainment such as Nintendo, computer games and DVD players, said Todd Richmond, an expert on technology in society and in the classroom at USC.

"They have to be engaged in different ways," he said. "It's difficult (for them to focus) when in the class, things move at a snail's pace."

When Bagdasarian, 33, took the conventional approach during her first years as a teacher, her students listened for only about 10 minutes.

"Looking out into the class, seeing glazed-over looks and students falling asleep, I knew they were bored," she said.

Later, she and Sarnoff would brainstorm how to stimulate their students with technology.

Richmond said more teachers are turning to technology to entice younger generations to learn, but many stick with their lecturing ways.

"It's a big waste of time unless there's interaction," he said.

Sarnoff said teachers could use the presentations to lecture, but they were designed to be interactive.

"The student can get involved, and the student should do the learning," he said. "(The teacher is) the guide."

The material in the presentations meets U.S. educational standards. So if teachers do not encourage interaction, they have the potential to deliver all the required information, Sarnoff said.

Riding on a wave of success, the company is not sure where it's headed next. Ideas are abundant -- branching out to other subjects, creating games and producing educational documentaries -- but qualified people are scarce.

Efforts by other individuals to design presentations for MultiMedia have been turned down because they didn't meet standards, Sarnoff said.

The eight employees -- all but one, who lives in Singapore, are scattered across America -- can only do so much. The company is based at Sarnoff's home in Manhattan Beach because it has no office.

Its growth hinges on creating new presentations, said Scott Bell, 31, the managing director.

"We want to take it to the next level in the next two years," he said.

A world history series is under way. But the presentations will be limited to social studies until the company finds qualified experts in other subjects.

Meanwhile, Bagdasarian is relieved of the balancing act between the business and teaching. She can focus on the company for now since she's on maternity leave until fall 2007.

Sarnoff, 62, retired early from teaching because the company was doing well. But he misses it.

"I would have taught two or three more years," he said.

Sarnoff said he does not miss dealing with school politics, but he misses what happened inside the classroom with his students.

As he talked about the presentations, he said "Yes, I used to use them," paused, turned his head to gaze out the window and laughed nostalgically.

"The squirrels and birds are my students now," he joked as a squirrel trying to climb into a birdhouse in his back yard knocked the birdseed inside all over the ground.

Sarnoff lectured the squirrel and tossed him some peanuts.

"We always joke around with him that that's all he does," Bell said.

Name: Multimedia Learning

Location: Manhattan Beach

Type: Multimedia-teaching-kits maker

Founded: 2004

Owners: Dana Bagdasarian and Herschel Sarnoff

Employees: Eight


Annual revenues: \$300,000 in 2005; \$400,000 estimated for 2006

Key clients: Catalogs that sell teaching aids

Information: www.multimedialearning.org; 310-365-5539

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