

Case Study:

Enabled by Design

Key themes

- Innovation: idea to implementation
- Developing by staying close to your users on-line
- Initial funding for new ideas
- Sustainable business model for the longer term
- Making effective use of technology to solve real problems



Introduction

This case study looks at the journey from having a great idea to implementing it as a workable and sustainable reality. The success comes from having a good idea, succeeding in funding it, remaining close to users and developing a sustainable model.



What is Enabled by design?

Enabled by Design is an online community working to challenge the one-size-fits all approach to assistive equipment, founded by Denise Stephens and Dominic Campbell. A dot.org start-up, it crowd-sources design and offers a place where people can share their experiences, views and ideas, as well as recommend products that make their day to day tasks more manageable. The overall aim of the community is to improve the design of assistive equipment; both in functionality and aesthetics, while championing the concept of inclusive design.

The beginning

Like many great ideas, Enabled by Design was born out of personal experiences. Denise Stephens was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) at the age of 24. She had to abandon a career as a forensic toxicologist, just as it was taking off. Her condition changed rapidly over the six months following diagnosis, and before long she was being offered a variety of assistive equipment by her occupational therapist.

A lot of this was extremely useful but most of it was clinical-looking and just plain ugly. Over time, she found that she had a houseful of equipment, most of it far from aesthetically pleasing, and not the sort of thing a young woman wants cluttering up her home. The final straw came when she was offered a Zimmer frame, which she politely declined.

At this point Denise had the beginning of an idea to set up an enterprise but didn't know exactly how it could work. Denise and her co-founder Dominic, a friend from university, discussed how her idea could take shape, perhaps becoming a sort of eBay for assistive equipment.

Taking the innovation further

Through contacts in his work with local government, Dominic found out about Social Innovation Camp, an experimental project which allows social innovators to put their heads together with software developers and designers at creative events where they can begin building web-based solutions to social problems. The first ever Innovation Camp was due to take place in April 2008, and had put out a call for ideas. Denise submitted her entry for Enabled by Design, and was one of six projects short listed and invited to attend the weekend-long event.

Realisation

At Social Innovation Camp, Denise and Dominic worked with a team, which included web technology experts, designers and people with business expertise to develop a proof of concept and an early stage business plan. They worked on the website and looked at how they might fund the project going forward. At the end of the weekend after a Dragon's Den-style pitching competition, Enabled by Design was awarded first prize as the 'project with most potential'. The panel of judges included innovation

expert Charles Leadbeater, Bebo co-founder Paul Birch, Yahoo technical evangelist Christian Heilmann and head of the Young Foundation's Launchpad, Simon Tucker.

A winning idea

Enabled by Design was awarded first prize at Social Innovation Camp, which included a prize fund worth £2,000 and access to their network of contacts. The funding was enough to begin spreading the word about the fledgling organisation and to keep them ticking over until they secured further funding. This also allowed Dominic and Denise the opportunity to begin building their community.

With the Social Innovation Camp under their belts, Enabled by Design applied for funding from UnLtd, a charitable organisation set up to promote social entrepreneurship. Again it was successful and received level one funding for the project.

Enabled by Design has also secured funding from NESTA through the Innovation Exchange's Next Practice programme.

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Funding

Initial funding for Enabled by Design came from:

- Social Innovation Camp: First prize
- UnLtd: Level one funding
- NESTA funding through the Innovation Exchange's Next Practice programme

How Enabled by Design has developed

Denise explains Enabled by Design in these simple terms:

Adaptation + Modern Design = Enabled by Design

The organisation aims to bridge the gap between people using assistive equipment and those people designing it. Amazingly, all too often the designers of such equipment are extremely unlikely to even speak to someone who is likely to rely on what they are designing.

Using technology and social networking

Enabled by Design has grown into an ever-expanding online community which shares opinions and discusses the pros and cons of assistive equipment with an end to making it better, more functional and more attractive. It uses the web in a far-reaching way, and as well as having a very accessible and smartly-designed website, it has a presence on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube.

‘Forging ties with larger organisations has at times been particularly challenging.’

Users might discuss, recommend or complain about anything from a chair to a pen to easy-to-use dental floss, and by expressing their experiences they aim to break down the barriers between those who design and make items and those who use them. Enabled by Design champions inclusive design, and aims for a bottom-up approach to designing assistive equipment, starting with those who need it rather than those who make it. Denise and Dominic also want to change the current perception of assistive equipment and thereby remove the stigma often attached to it.

The site provides a fantastic community space for anybody interested in improving design and usability of objects, whether for help with mobility problems or simply making every day life more straightforward and easier on the eye.

One user posted about little self-heating warm packs from Japan, which she had used to ease back pain. She wasn't sure where they were available in the UK, and her post prompted a discussion about where similar objects could be found and bought.

Another excellent example of online communities in action happened where a user flagged up the customised crutches with contemporary designs she had started to make and sell. The discussion that followed highlighted other crutches that improve on the bog standard NHS grey version, and eventually led to a potential collaboration between the opening poster and a website specialising in the sale of designer crutches.



‘The organisation aims to bridge the gap between people using assistive equipment and those people designing it.’

Challenges

Enabled by Design has been working hard to build relationships and partnerships with other like-minded organisations and along the way it has come up against some barriers.

Forging ties with larger organisations has at times been particularly challenging, with reactions from some big charities in particular ranging from not taking Enabled by Design seriously through to seeing it as competition for a project already in place.

Positive coverage in the national press has provided something of a shift in attitude towards Enabled by Design in the third sector, as well as attracting a large amount of attention from members of the design community eager to make contact and build bridges.

It has also been a challenge to get that community underway. Denise and Dominic found that users were often reluctant to speak out about the equipment they had been given, almost as though they felt they had no right to complain. Enabled by Design continues to work to gain users’ trust and make this a welcoming, as well as effective, place to further inclusive design.

Learning fast

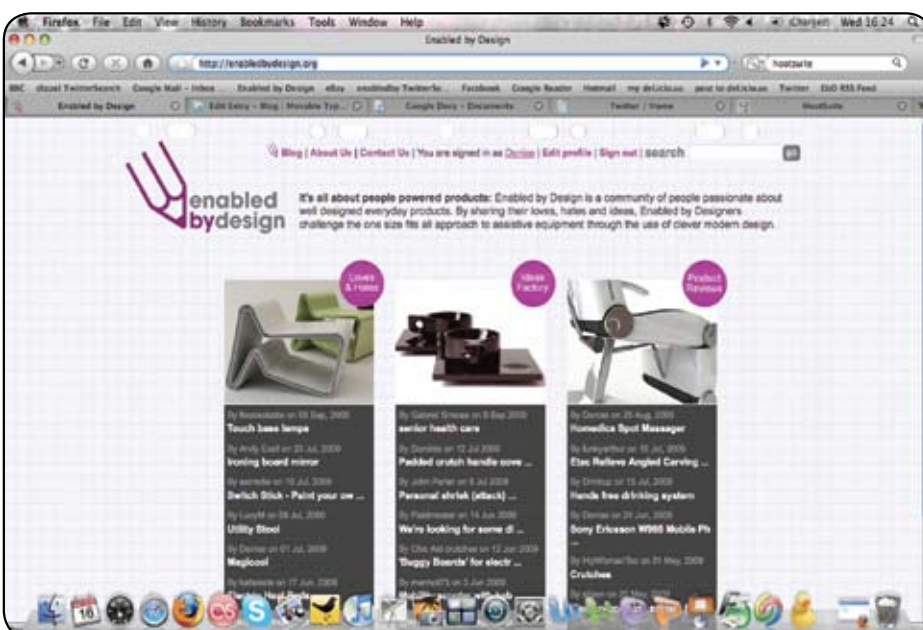
Denise has also had to undergo something of a steep learning curve to keep up to pace with all that the internet can do for Enabled by Design. Social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter now form a central part of the way Enabled by Design works as a community, pulling users from all sides of the debate to their site.

Digital exclusion

While there is a challenge involved in getting web-savvy users on board, this is nothing to the barriers involved where digital exclusion has a hold. A large number of potential users who could benefit from Enabled by Design have no access to the internet. Denise and Dominic are extremely keen to reach as many people as possible, including those without access to the Internet. Their current thoughts include working with local authorities and their residents to overcome this barrier.

Barriers to success

- Lack of support within the third sector
- Need for higher profile in the design community
- Building technological understanding
- Gaining users’ trust
- Digital exclusion among potential users



The way forward – towards sustainability

- Within a year of the Social Innovation Camp, Enabled by Design began working towards becoming fully sustainable.
- The organisation has a business model in place, partly as a result of discussions with their business mentor provided as part of the Next Practice programme.
- The team are speaking to investors and hoping to set up partnerships in the private sector as well as building links with larger charities. They are keen to build partnerships with organisations that share their ethos and their passion for inclusive design.
- They are looking at creating a sustainable income through pay-per-click referrals from the website, sponsorship and future consultancy work, profits from which will be returned to the business to improve the service it provides to the Enabled by Design community.

Learning points

- Don't be afraid of challenging questions – they can help you to strengthen your ideas. If others want to know how your innovation could possibly work, this will help you to develop your plans with more precision and a help you to form a more profound understanding of your goals.
- Make use of technology to spread the word. Twitter and Facebook can be invaluable means of building community and getting a momentum going, which could see your project flourish sooner than expected.
- Engage with your end users – just as Denise and Dominic interact with their community, your ability to respond to your users needs could be key to the success of your project.
- Look for like-minded organisations you can forge links with to further both your missions. This can be daunting and is not always straightforward, but useful collaborations can help take an innovation through to realisation.

Drivers for innovation: what makes Enabled by Design work?

- Meeting a genuine need: Much of Enabled by Design's success is down to its ability to understand exactly what its users need. Denise knew there was a need for improved design in assistive equipment, because she had plenty of experience with the unattractive and clunky items she had been offered by the NHS.
- Mission-driven and outcome-focused: Enabled by Design is all about its users and its community, which is why it works so well. The users, from reviewers through to the design community, back its mission. They are in a position to help make real changes and are also first in line to benefit from its success.
- Broad appeal: The site can help users at every end of the spectrum, from people posting and reading reviews through to commercial designers looking for ideas and information gleaned from experienced users.
- Keeping users close: Enabled by Design has built a strong community, but rather than sitting back and allowing it to thrive alone, founders Denise and Dominic are constantly present, interacting with users joining in discussions.
- Working with others: Denise and Dominic are keen to encourage collaboration, both between Enabled by Design and other partners, and between the users in the site's community. This openness not only furthers the organisation's mission, working with others in this way also stimulates the development of new ideas.

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Just the beginning ...

Enabled by Design is a perfect example of an innovation created through personal experience. It not only serves its community, it also allows that ever-growing community to become part of Enabled by Design, and to help to further its mission. The collaborations it has encouraged, its use of new technologies and social media, the inclusive, bottom-up approach it has adopted and the constant involvement of its founders mean that it will continue to stimulate a whole new approach to design, building new innovations along the way.



‘Enabled by Design has been working hard to build relationships and partnerships with other like-minded organisations’

Date

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LOTTERY FUNDED

The Sustainable Funding Project is an NCVO initiative working in partnership with the Big Lottery Fund and Charity Bank.

NCVO's Sustainable Funding Project is the sector's premier provider of tools and resources encouraging and enabling voluntary and community organisations to develop and implement a sustainable income strategy.

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