

Eye on the Prize

SoloHealth turns self-service consumer technology into a vision care stimulus

By Jan Herrera

Walk through any retail superstore in the country today, and you'll probably be able to complete all of the following tasks with ease: print photos from your own camera, check your blood pressure, rent a movie, withdraw money from your bank account, and pay for and bag all of your purchases. What do all these actions have in common? If you haven't guessed yet, they're all consumer activities facilitated by automated machines that guide users step-by-step through

business model – the idea that consumers that use their self-service health kiosks would in turn be more likely to visit healthcare offices and purchase health-related products.

The company's first innovative product, EyeSite, has generated positive buzz among consumers and eye care specialists. EyeSite is a self-service vision-screening kiosk that is free to consumers. In about three minutes, the device prompts the user to answer a set of questions using a touch screen interface and shows a suc-

relevant and customized content that can help motivate them to take action," adds Foster on what makes EyeSite stand out.

SoloHealth's business model for generating revenue depends on partnerships with eye care specialists and product manufacturers, not the individual user of their product. With EyeSite, for example, SoloHealth partners with manufacturers of vision products, like Transitions or Optos, and eye care practitioners who, in exchange for paying to lease a kiosk for one year, are given

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the process of receiving a specific service.

Today, self-service technologies are increasingly commonplace, and Bart Foster, Founder and CEO of SoloHealth, is driving self-service further in the direction of healthcare. Founded in 2007, SoloHealth has been able to take advantage of the market's preference for self-servicing healthcare devices and entered the industry at an optimal time. The technology company combines the competence and efficiency of two major growth trends: self-service technology and consumer-directed healthcare. Consequently, the company's vision to be a global leader in self-service health screening and healthcare recommendations is forging a groundbreaking path – one that Foster and SoloHealth is counting on to lead to success.

Prior to establishing SoloHealth, Foster spent eight years working in CIBA VISION—the eye care division of Novartis AG that primarily focuses on manufacturing innovative contact lenses. “I was working with some very large customers in the UK where I was on international assignment. The challenge was to take the traffic that they had in their stores and convert them into optical customers,” says Foster. While at Novartis, Foster realized that more consumers might actively seek out vision care and vision-related products if they were provided with the tools to self-manage their vision health assessment.

This is the crux of SoloHealth's busi-

ness model – the idea that consumers that use their self-service health kiosks would in turn be more likely to visit healthcare offices and purchase health-related products. Upon completion of the assessment, EyeSite provides the user with a Vision Test Report that compiles details regarding their vision, as well as a recommendation to visit an eye care specialist in their area for treatment.

“The idea for EyeSite was formed by thinking about the photo machines in ATMs and airline check-in kiosks, and how it's a self-service environment. What if you could come up with a way to let people educate themselves about their own visual duty, and then give them information on how to take action?” Foster explains. The kiosks are placed in high-traffic areas – including grocery stores, pharmacies, malls and large employers – to maximize consumer exposure to the technology.

“We're primarily in high-traffic grocery stores that are near an optical or an eye care practitioner,” Foster adds. “We're unique because there isn't another self-service way to test your own vision. Also, since we're capturing information about a specific user, we can provide that user with very

control over the advertising on the kiosk and the list of recommended specialists given to consumers with receipt of their vision assessment.

Cynics might have you believe that when it comes to healthcare, consumers aren't going to



trust a machine to provide them with specialty healthcare services. But EyeSite isn't giving consumers a diagnosis, it's giving them an assessment that they can take to an optometrist so that an eye care specialist can give them appropriate treatment. EyeSite isn't an alternative to a visit to the optometrist's office, it's an educational tool and a motivator to get people to see their eye health as just as important as any other facet of individual wellbeing.

Blood pressure, heart rate and even body fat percentages are health appraisals already monitored by high-technology kiosks, and Foster hopes to position SoloHealth as a leader in the self-service healthcare market. Pharmacies and other retail outlets that carry such technologies benefit from increased consumer traffic and a decrease in the amount of attention required by employees in answering basic consumer questions.

The gamble that SoloHealth took with the introduction of EyeSite to the public has not only benefitted the company but its users and the vision care industry as well. "I think the industry is learning a tremendous amount from what we're doing because of the questions we're asking. We've had over 275,000 people use the

EyeSite kiosk, and when we ask the question, 'When was your last eye exam?' our data shows that 25 percent of the people have never had an eye exam—ever. We're proving that we can educate people by allowing them to take healthcare into their own hands," asserts Foster.

It's a mutualistic relationship as SoloHealth makes it clear that the services EyeSite provides aren't equivalent to the thorough eye exams that one must get from eye specialists. As more and more consumers are being educated regarding their vision, EyeSite kiosks have also been of great assistance to eye specialists, bringing in more patients and enabling them to expand their practices. Furthermore, SoloHealth has proven that their technology works and is stable, with more clients committing to and signing up for longer term contracts. Proving their technology's viability is imperative for SoloHealth since satisfied clients will continuously pay the company to be included in the list of recommended practicing specialists passed along to consumers. "We made a strategic investment and took a risk by doing that," Foster shares.

With its innovative characteristics, user-friendly interface and strategic placement, it shouldn't come as a surprise that EyeSite has become an award-winning new technology in a relatively short span of time. In 2008, EyeSite won three major awards: "Best New Innovation," "Best Health Care Innovation," and "Best in Show" at the Global Kiosk Industry Trade



Bart Foster
Founder & CEO of SoloHealth

Show, the largest trade show in the world for self-service devices. At the show, SoloHealth was able to surpass large companies such as Home Depot and IBM in terms of self-service technologies—a huge feat for the fledgling company.

In spite of the changing demands of the market and the present condition of the economy, SoloHealth isn't content to just maintain their current success, they're also dedicated to fostering future growth. Foster shares, "It's difficult to get people to spend money. I think staying focused right now is the biggest challenge for a company of our size because there are so many different opportunities or demands for different versions of the product, as well as additional features and functionality that our customers want. As a small business, we need to remain focused at our core."

The positive feedback SoloHealth has received on the EyeSite kiosks, has allowed it to expand geographically and increase its output. "Since the inception, we were able to prove that we can build a device that people will use and follow up with by getting an eye exam," says Foster. The company has been able to grow from zero units in the market to over 80 in a brief period of time. EyeSite is now in six markets across the country, including Atlanta, St. Louis, Birmingham, Charlotte, Richmond and Houston.

Now and in the future, SoloHealth will remain true to its core by focusing on three main factors: awareness, education and action. For Foster, the company's expansion doesn't just benefit SoloHealth. He adds, "There's a reason why the company is named SoloHealth—it's about self-service healthcare. We want to establish additional products, but we also see many products in our roadmap in the future where, based on awareness, education and action, we will be able to get more people to learn more about their overall health." 

