

Improving School Communications through Custom Mobile Apps



Alefiya Bhatia - CEO

CEOCFO: Ms. Bhatia, what is the concept at Crescerance?

Ms. Bhatia: The word “crescere” means to grow or expand, and that is what we are helping schools and students do through mobile. We work with schools, Kindergarten through 12th grade, in two key ways. One is that we are improving school communications through mobile, we create a custom app for the school or district so that parents have access to the app for the school. When users download the app and they get an athletic schedule, a calendar of events, parent directory, staff directory, and easy access to the things that they need as a parent, student, staff member, or even an alum of a school. The first part is really focusing on improving school communications and doing it through the mobile channel. We all have cell phones, and we use our cell phones 24/7. Smartphones are the first place that we go when we need information about anything, but you would be surprised that most schools do not leverage this mobile technology. This is where we come in to help them with mobile engagement so that they can have their own app and communicate what they need to with their school app.

CEOCFO: What are some of the challenges working with the education industry that perhaps do not exist in other places?

Ms. Bhatia: As far as challenges are concerned for the education industry, funding is always an issue. Where do the funds come from and who is paying for what? That is definitely a challenge that we see as a company that is serving education. Another challenge is awareness. If you are able to figure out who to get to and how to talk to the right people at schools, it is not a problem. When we have a meeting with somebody, we are able to talk to them, and typically it is a sale that is closed. The challenge is in ensuring that there is enough awareness in the industry of who we are and what we do. There is a lot of marketing that needs to be done in education to really establish ourselves as a brand that is a trusted partner in education. We do that in a few different ways. We attend events, we sponsor events, and we present sessions at education conferences across the country. There are millions of them, and we try to attend 35 to 40 every year. I would say that is the biggest factor in terms of us being able to be successful with implementing at schools, it is ensuring that there is strong marketing and awareness at the schools with the administrators knowing about us and immediately thinking about us when they need help.

CEOCFO: What other main category of products are you offering?

Ms. Bhatia: The second thing that we do at schools is based on mobile and mobile apps as well. We have a program that is called MAD-learn; MAD stands for Mobile App Development. The program is focusing on teaching kids how to be creators of technology and how to create and manage their own mobile apps. We have kids as young as the third grade all the way up to high school who are becoming mobile app makers. They are on our platform making apps, launching them into app stores, and changing the world with their ideas.

CEOCFO: How do you breakthrough all the noise in your industry?

Ms. Bhatia: The biggest factor that enables us to break through the noise is quite simply, our offering. Understanding what our program is, what our product is, and what the value of that is? There are a lot of services that schools need to have just because they need to have them. For example, you need to have a set of school buses that you can have out in the community picking up your kids and bringing them into school. What we are offering is not by any means something you have to have to exist as a school, but our products are extremely valuable tools and programs for these schools to be successful. They are cutting edge, and they are meeting the specific needs of schools today. We have a lot of conversations about STEM education and the need for more coders and programmers, and that is what we are targeting. We are creating generations of kids who are interested in creating apps and creating technology. It is about timing, what it is that we have and when it is that we are offering it to the market. I think that we have been lucky to have both of those fit right with our programs so far.

CEOCFO: *Is there a common thread of particular types of schools, sizes of school districts or geography amongst your customers?*

Ms. Bhatia: It is across the board. We have schools as small as 50 students all the way up to 50,000 student districts. We work with all kinds of public schools and districts and private and independent schools. What we are offering is really not just specific to one type of community or one type of school, so our market is spread out across the board. We are focused on Kindergarten through 12th grade.

CEOCFO: *What is the key to a comprehensive, effective offering that is really user friendly?*

Ms. Bhatia: Our key to that has been the educators and former educators on our team. I myself am a former educator. I do not have a technology background, (that's my partner's background). But as educators, we have our ears on the ground, having been in the trenches and understanding what schools and students need and paying very close attention to what our schools are saying. Unfortunately, too often today we have companies and products created that are so far removed from the actual market they are trying to serve, that immediately your program is not really as valuable. We have very close ears on the ground, and we are in classrooms constantly talking with students and talking with teachers. We have a nice laundry list of features, functionalities and requests that have come from teachers and students in terms of what they want. We are building and continue to build out our products based on what we are being asked for. You cannot go wrong with that. It is pretty simple if you just listen to what your market is saying.

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- Alefiya Bhatia

CEOCFO: *What might you have changed or added based on feedback from your customers?*

Ms. Bhatia: Just in regard to the apps that we create for schools (the school app or a district app), we have gotten great ideas from administrators and the district level folks. One idea in particular that we implemented last year was a teacher feedback about a school app where they were always taking and sending pictures in their newsletter every week and they wanted an easy way to take pictures with the school app that actually has the school logo on it so that they could brand the photos. They did not want to have to sit in Photoshop for hours and fuss with them, they could just take a picture with the app that has the school logo and post on the photo and then quickly email it to a parent or post it to their photo gallery. We created a feature called click and share, which is just that. You click a button in your app, and it opens up your camera, but your camera now has your school logo imposed on the image. It is just an easy way to improve branding, marketing and awareness for that school. That is one idea, and another idea was from a couple students at a school in Florida who said they had a paper planner that had class blocks and space to write homework and assignments. The planner was key for each student, and they lived by it but did not want to have to carry it around everywhere, so they wanted it in their app. We built a student planner functionality into their app that has that same capability. Having that app be the one place that you go for anything that you need from school is the goal, so we continue to build out features around that.

CEOCFO: *What surprised you as the company has grown and developed?*

Ms. Bhatia: What has surprised me most is the insatiable appetite that kids have, especially young kids: for knowledge, information and for wanting to figure out more about their world. I have been in the classroom many years and I have taught many years, so I have seen that on some level. But now, we have kids who are coming up with app ideas every second! As a company, we cannot keep up with tracking all of their ideas! It is phenomenal to see what they can come up with. We actually have a great picture of a student who has a big chart up with all of the ideas that he came up with in five minutes. There are about 50 ideas on it, and a lot of those ideas are ideas that venture capitalists would look at and may even want to fund. I think what surprised me most (and it shouldn't have, because our kids are geniuses), is the number of ideas that our kids have to make their world and community better, to help their society and affect some sort of change even though they are a third, fourth or fifth grader. They just have phenomenal ideas, and we love to be a part of that in one way or another.

CEOCFO: *With security, cyber bullying and privacy, how do you ensure the highest level of oversight at all times with still maintaining privacy?*

Ms. Bhatia: We have actually spent a lot of time over the last year in preparation for launching MAD-learn, focusing on that from a technology perspective as well as an education perspective to really ensure that teachers and students are understanding responsible use of anything online, not just our program. From an education perspective, as part of our curriculum we have a couple lessons that are built in about digital citizenship and responsible use of the Internet. From a

technology perspective, we have accounted for the highest levels of security on our site and on anything that students touch or use in any way. There is a set of standards that exist and that we need to follow as a company, and we ensure that we do that. For the most part, there are great teachers in the world and they are taking it as their responsibility to ensure that students are educated in how to deal with cyber-bullying and how to be responsible online. We have been able to assist them in whatever way we can.

CEOCFO: *Do your clients tend to take advantage of all your services?*

Ms. Bhatia: Typically, schools or districts that we work with take advantage of both programs that we offer because they are very closely related. They may have all their eighth graders creating mobile apps, but they do not have a mobile app for their school, so they want to make that happen. In some cases, they actually are having students create the app for the school as well. They are very complimentary, typically it is something where schools will take advantage of both of those resources, but there are always some that just do one or the other.

CEOCFO: *How is business?*

Ms. Bhatia: Business is phenomenal. We just launched the product MAD-learn in January of this year, and we have 10,000 students on the program as of today. It has grown very quickly, and it is continuing to grow. We are in a formal round of capital raising as we speak and that is intended to help phenomenally so that we can get to millions of students and millions of schools across the country and across the world. That is where we are at the moment.

CEOCFO: *What might be different a year from now?*

Ms. Bhatia: Just looking particularly at one of our products, MAD-learn, a year from now we have a full progression of mobile app creation and coding that we are building out. Right now we are focusing on the younger kids and creating apps with our drag and drop interface. That is translating into a lot more complexity and a lot more of looking behind the scenes, learning the code, tinkering with the code, and rewriting the code yourself as the kids get older and more advanced in that realm. Those are some of the things we are launching next year. In terms of the MAD-learn program, we have three tracks. One is for programming and coding, one is for entrepreneurship that we are building out heavily, and the other one is for design. Those are all three tracks that we are building out within the program based on student needs, student feedback and student interest. We know that not every one of us is going to be interested in, for example, design, but you have programming as an option and entrepreneurship as an option, and that tends to cover a large majority of our kids.

CEOCFO: *Do you see going outside of the U.S. at some point?*

Ms. Bhatia: We are already in five different countries not including the U.S., so we do have a lot of international interest and international activity happening at the moment. We have a couple hundred schools in the Middle East that are soon going to be starting MAD-learn, and there has been a lot of interest in countries like Australia and China. There has been a lot of interest internationally, and we only expect that to grow over the next few years.

CEOCFO: *With so much opportunity and several different products, how do you stay focused? What have you learned as CEO stay on top?*

Ms. Bhatia: The key for us has been that we have a geographically dispersed team. We are based here in Atlanta, but we have people on the front end sales side in five different states here in the U.S. and we also have part of our team that is in India. What that has forced us to do is ensure that even though we are not physically in the same space or same office, we are all aligned in terms of vision. Call it heartbeat, passion or goals, but we have to work extra hard to ensure the alignment happens because of geographic disparity. What that has done for us to our advantage is that it has forced us to really keenly identify what our goals are on a quarterly or annual basis and make sure that everybody in the company knows those are and is working toward those. The geographic disparity has actually helped us with that focus, and it has helped ensure that it is clear, communicated and planned out, and that we are all really on the same wave length as far as the plan for the company. We are at the end of the year now planning out goals for next year, and that is always a fun time!

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine



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