

WHY HOW NOW BROWN COW IS 'CHOICE' FOR BUSINESS

If she sells sea shells on the sea shore, then an innovative voice coaching programme based at the University's e-centre might be able to help her sell more.

SpeechSchool.TV was launched in February this year to help people speak more clearly and gain a competitive edge when it comes to business.

The lessons are online and presented by company founder Simon Angelo and television presenter Tami Smith, who record the programmes from two studio locations in Auckland.

Angelo noticed that people were being held back in their careers by their accents and established a web-based learning process that includes teaching Received Pronunciation.

"The way you speak is one of the most important things about you. Accents are important but so is speech clarity," he says.

"Half of the people I have seen have been new migrants and international students wanting to neutralise their accents.

"These talented people possess good English but struggle with communicating in 'local speak'.

"Prospective employers worry they won't be able to establish rapport with customers and colleagues and the impact of these reactions on people's confidence can be quite damaging."

Angelo, who has worked in advertising and took voice coaching lessons from the age of five, approached the e-centre business incubator on the University's Albany campus with his idea last year and within a few months it was going live.

"Discovering the e-centre was like a singer meeting the von Trapp family," he says. "It's a perfect fit."

Steve Corbett, chief executive of the e-centre, says he saw the potential for SpeechSchool.TV as a tool to increase productivity in business.

"Employees who can communicate more effectively are more productive," he says. "The product has significant global potential."

He also says students who take the lessons will gain more confidence when they interact, leading to a better all-round experience at university.

SpeechSchool.TV teaches Received Pronunciation, an American-based accent programme, and a Master Communicator programme that helps users to establish themselves as confident public speakers and reduce mumbling and stuttering.

"I've not been at the e-centre long, but it has helped me tap into networks I'd struggle to reach on my own," says Angelo.

He has enjoyed success in coming third in the Telecommunications Industry Group's Launch Pad 2010 competition for the best new start-up business idea.

Now SpeechSchool.TV has entered the Technium Challenge, which could see it promoted in Europe to an audience of hundreds of millions of people.



Simon Angelo is using the expertise of Massey University PhD student Vai Yoganathan to enhance his SpeechSchool.TV online voice coaching programme.

Angelo, who grew up in Taranaki and went to New Plymouth Boys' High School, says the results of his work can be "life changing".

"Accents are important, but you can learn Received Pronunciation and still keep your identity," says Angelo. "Star Trek actor and Yorkshireman Patrick Stewart is a perfect example as he performs with the Royal Shakespeare Company."

He is now using the expertise from the e-centre's Postgraduate Garage – a collective of bright doctoral students who use their talent to help products reach commercial success.

He has teamed up with engineering PhD student Vai Yoganathan, whose research is into speech enhancement in noisy environments.

Together they are looking to see if there is a way to automate the assessment of audio files, which would speed up the process as the business grows towards its target of 20,000 subscribers within five years.

Yoganathan, who did her undergraduate and master's degrees in the School of Engineering and Advanced Technology, says she is excited about the project.

"It is rewarding to see how my knowledge can be applied to commercial products in the real world," she says. ■

– Kathryn Farrow