

Changing the World

by Nancy Knowlton

In March 2007 my husband, Dave Martin, and I received a summons to the UK. Scant details were provided, but the request was clear – we just had to be in Birmingham for an event on a Friday evening. To our great delight Dave received the Outstanding Achievement Award at the British Education Suppliers Association's (BESA) annual Education Resource Awards event for his invention of the interactive whiteboard that has changed, and is changing, the face of education in so many countries around the world.

As the presenter spoke to the assembled crowd, he gave credit to the central role that the interactive whiteboard has played in pulling substantial amounts of technology into the classroom and forever changing education as we know it at the start of the 21st century.



In announcing the 2007 Outstanding Achievement Award, Ray Barker, the director of BESA, said that Dave “can truly be said to have changed the nature of education. He launched the very first interactive whiteboard in 1991 and since then has worked to develop more innovative products to make the classroom exciting and learning easier.”

A Rocky Start

In the very early days, Dave and I faced an extremely troubling time in the business. SMART had been insolvent for quite a long time (and it is very stressful running a business that is hanging on by a thread). One night we sat in the solarium in our condo and faced the brutal reality of a hopeless situation. As the sun set and the room became gradually dark, we talked in earnest about what we should do with SMART. Should we keep struggling and juggling receivables and payables from one pay day to the next? Or should we fold our tent and move on to something else, knowing that we had given SMART and the interactive whiteboard our best shot?

Our bankers were certainly grumbling that the business was on a shaky footing – and with good reason. Our accountants and lawyers were pragmatic and didn't mince words about our condition. They talked to us about what bankruptcy would mean and how the company might come out of it (or not).

It was virtually dark in the room when one of us said the fateful words – we wanted to stick with the company and have our products in every classroom, meeting room and boardroom around the world, literally everywhere that people gathered to learn and collaborate. That statement seemed like such an outrageous vision given our financial position at the time that we both simultaneously burst out laughing. We laughed for some time and soon regained our commitment and resolve to carry on no matter how bleak the outlook.

Bringing the Vision to Life

Today we have moved from struggling to roaring growth as we satisfy accelerating demand around the world. We continue to add to our growing product line with new models of our interactive whiteboard and new versions of the software. We offer accessories and complementary products for an experience that engages and captivates.

Business and government customers are accelerating their adoption as well. The twin motivators of spiraling travel costs and hassles are driving large-scale adoptions. Our products have become a staple of communication and collaboration across a broad range of industries and applications.

Slowly but surely the vision that we had so many years ago is taking shape in classrooms, meetings rooms and boardrooms around the world.

A Higher Calling

It's very clear to me each day as I come to work that we are doing something with vision and purpose – we're changing the way that the world learns and works. That is a higher order calling, something that energizes everyone at SMART.

If you ask Dave, he could talk easily about how technology both enables and mediates human communication, but in the end, he will emphasize, it's all about people and helping them share what's on their minds.

Nancy Knowlton is the co-founder and CEO of SMART Technologies, the world's leading supplier of interactive whiteboards. Nancy's husband and SMART co-founder, David Martin, is the inventor of the interactive whiteboard category. Together they have built a company that is focused on delivering easy-to-use, yet feature-rich collaboration tools, including the SMART Board™ interactive whiteboard. Nancy can be reached at NancyK@smarttech.com.