Computer science graduate helps London start-up through testing times

In late 2009, Camden-based software development company Screama launched a new product which enables companies to send marketing ads with outbound emails. It needed to try it out on potential users first, though, to objectively assess whether it met its intended purpose. Working to a tight schedule, HELO matched the company with UCL graduate Ashton King, a specialist in human-computer interaction, who substituted an expert review for multiple real-life users. Screama was delighted with the results – and Ashton was spurred on to start his own consultancy, Tigersense.

No company, small or large, wants to risk its reputation by launching a product onto the marketplace without first trying it out on potential users. But for a start-up like computer software development company Screama, based in Camden, Central London, usability testing can be prohibitively expensive.

Cognisant of the quality of research and calibre of teaching within UCL’s Computer Science department, Screama approached HELO in late 2009 to see if they could help with the testing of a new product which enables companies to send marketing ads with outbound emails. The HELO project team found the perfect participant in MSc graduate Ashton King, who had just completed his thesis on human-computer interaction.

“It was a win-win situation,” says Ashton. “I had precisely the skills and knowledge Screama required. And I was looking to set up my own consultancy, so I was hoping to learn how to negotiate terms of business with clients, coordinate projects and deliver recommendations – all the things they don’t teach you in computer science studies!”

Ashton and a fellow student conducted an expert review, which cuts out the need for multiple real-life users and thus allows usability testing to be done more quickly and consistently. Although the company launched the product concurrently, as it wanted to go to market early in the year, the results of the testing were so effective that Screama was able to make immediate amendments to the product and re-launch a new, improved version.

Ian Collins, director of Screama, says: “Ashton’s work enabled us to understand customer behaviour and improve our targeting activities. His advice was invaluable and we were able to incorporate over 80% of his recommendations before we re-launched the product.”

The success of the collaboration made Ashton feel much more confident about starting his own business, Tigersense, which focuses on user-centered design and usability testing. The strapline? Don’t rely on commonsense.
About UCL

University College London was established in 1826 and is ranked seventh in the world’s top universities. The university is a modern, outward-looking institution, with more than 4,000 academic and research staff committed to engaging with the major issues of our times. It has a global reach, with 34% of its students coming from outside the UK, from almost 140 countries.

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About UCL Advances

The centre for entrepreneurship at UCL, UCL Advances, offers training, networking and business support for staff, students and external entrepreneurs to encourage and enable new enterprises to get going. Unique in the UK Higher Education sector, its primary role is to promote a culture of entrepreneurship on campus and engagement with entrepreneurs and small businesses beyond UCL’s boundaries, and currently delivers over 30 activity programmes.

UCL Advances is affiliated with UCL Enterprise, which provides UCL’s structures for engaging with business for commercial and societal benefit.

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About Business Support

UCL provides direct business support for internal and external organisations through a variety of programmes, such as grants, space provision, advice and problem solving. The HELO programme is one of these programmes.

HELO (Higher Education London Outreach) is an innovative programme that matches up small and medium sized businesses (SMEs) needing to tackle specific problems with students and academic staff who have specialist knowledge and skills in relevant areas, for short-term consultancies. The HELO project is delivered by UCL Advances and supported by London Business School. The project is part-funded by the European Union.

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