

Drive Power gets ready to roll

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Will England of Minneapolis-based startup Drive Power hopes teen drivers across the country will get his company's DriveScribe app on their smartphones. (Submitted rendering: Drive Power)

The National Transportation Safety Board may have recommended a ban on using cellphones while driving. But Will England, with his Minneapolis-based startup company called Drive Power, thinks there's potential in using mobile technology to encourage safe driving.

Drive Power has used technology licensed from the University of Minnesota to create a mobile phone app called DriveScribe that talks and flashes color codes to novice drivers about their habit, and even notifies parents when their teens are driving poorly.

England — a Princeton University and Oxford University alumnus who most recently worked at Chicago-based private equity firm Valor Equity Partners — plans to start marketing DriveScribe to parents in April. The app is expected to cost about \$5 to \$10.

The Mayfield Village, Ohio-based Progressive Casualty Insurance Co. has already been marketing a hardware device called Snapshot that tracks driver behaviors in return for insurance plan discounts, and automobile companies have been increasingly packaging Web-based applications into their dashboards.

Even so, England argues DriveScribe has an advantage because the mobile-based technology makes it portable and user-friendly. The company in a promotional video claims the app won't distract teen drivers because the screen changes color based on the message, meaning the drivers don't have to read what the phone is saying; audio also can be turned off.

"The data collection component of this is based on a smartphone versus hardware. That's very, very powerful," England said.

He said he is already in discussions with a number of insurance companies about possible partnerships. He sees potential in mining data from the app, creating a system of scoring driving habits that might generate interest in the insurance industry.

For now, England is working out of the Minneapolis office of St. Paul-based marketing firm Augeo, which is an investor and minority partner in Drive Power. England declined to say how much money Drive Power has but says the company is "well-funded." He described Augeo principal and co-chairman Juan Sabater as a longtime friend and fellow Princeton alum who believes in the company's potential.

Joy Lindsay, president and co-founder of Bloomington-based StarTec Investments, thinks there is a potential market for DriveScribe. But she suspects England will have to ramp up quickly and establish market share before automobile manufacturers start packaging similar technology inside their cars.

If England were to pitch to her for an investment, Lindsay would want to know what kind of potential partnership discussions Drive Power is seeking with auto companies and insurance companies.

“It would make some kind of sense to integrate that with the automobile,” Lindsay said of the DriveScribe technology. Drive Power “might be the group that provides the technology to do that.”

The only other employee at the startup is Alec Gorjestani, a University of Minnesota mechanical engineering researcher who helped develop the technology behind DriveScribe and is now Drive Power’s vice president of technology.

If all goes as planned, England thinks his company could have five to 10 employees and sales of up to \$1 million by the end of the year.

England came across the technology behind DriveScribe last fall while serving as an adviser for the university’s Office for Technology Commercialization. He moved to the Twin Cities last year because his fiancée, a doctor, is doing her residency at Minneapolis-area hospitals.

The technology uses the phone, with its GPS-based systems and other functions, to track how a driver is performing. It provides real-time feedback to the driver; blocks calls, emails and text messages while the vehicle is in operation; notifies parents in real time when traffic violations occur; and logs driving activity to a DriveScribe Web portal that parents can use to review their children’s driving habits.

England has worked with Augeo to set up a coupon-based rewards system to encourage teenage drivers to use the app. He also plans social media functions that will allow teenagers to share their driving scores with their peers.

The licensing agreement with the U of M gives the university a minority equity stake in Drive Power — which means the university could get a big payday if, for example, a larger company acquires Drive Power.

The U of M has been overhauling the way it licenses technology to make the process more business-friendly.

“I’ve heard a lot of negative feedback about that office, maybe some of which is validated by events in the past,” England said. “But I think ... now they are very interested in making it easy for guys like me or larger companies to come in and take a look at their [research] portfolio and do something with it. There are a lot of technologies and ideas that they have.”

For a link to a video explaining DriveScribe, click here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nq1sIoOWv-E&feature=player_embedded#!