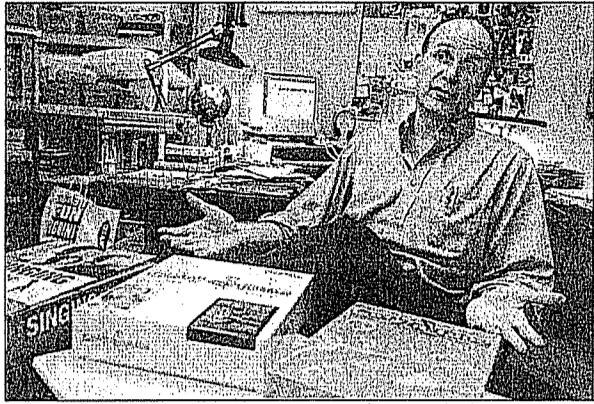


With right support, Tampa voice software emerges a star



Times photo — THOMAS M. GOETHE

Carlo Franzblau, 45, freshly back from the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, reflects on the success of his Carry-a-Tune Technologies.

■ Repackaged and freshly hyped, the Singing Coach wows in Las Vegas just as it discovers potential beyond voice lessons.

By DAVE GUSSOW
Times Personal Technology Editor

LAS VEGAS — Carlo Franzblau beamed like a proud father and handed out cigars, real and bubble gum. His Tampa-born baby, software called the Singing Coach, was making its debut on an international stage.

And what an entrance it was. A mention in the *New York Times* the first day of the recent Consumer Electronics Show started a stampede of media coverage.

The *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* stopped by Franzblau's Carry-a-Tune Technologies booth, as did about a half-dozen TV stations and magazines, including *PC World*. He did an interview on a syndicated radio show.

Crowds gathered around the company's booth. Sales on the company's Web site quadrupled.

"I kept asking (my publicist), 'Is this good? Is this good?'" Franzblau said.

Indeed, it's the kind of publicity hundreds of the companies that exhibit at the giant trade show crave, but attention can be elusive at a show that puts companies as big as Samsung, with their 25,000-square-foot booth, in the same arena as Carry-a-Tune, which had kiosk-sized space in a building across the street from the main hall.

INSIDE

How Singing Coach can help even the tone deaf learn to sing. 5D

Yet sometimes the quirky can find its way into the spotlight. The Singing Coach uses voice measurements to grade people as they sing, giving users a score at the end of each song, and its prospects go beyond music. It might have a future in helping kids learn to read, and there might be a business use, too.

"We have a real opportunity to create something special," said Ken Spiegel, the company's vice president and general manager. "Something that will last."

Please see TUNE 5D

Tune from 1D

The road to the spotlight

The Singing Coach is not a new product. It has been on the market since late 2003.

Franzblau, a principal in his family's Thompson Group business near Tampa International Airport, easily acknowledges he knows more about direct marketing and the company's specialties of cigars, linens and casual living items than he does about technology.

Following the family business model, he was selling the Singing Coach from the Web (www.carryatune.com) and advertising in music magazines. He spent \$5,000 on one ad and got only two orders. Still, he stuck with it.

"We were selling enough that I was reassured there was a demand for the product," Franzblau said.

But it wasn't catching fire.

So in the last year, Franzblau hired some people and made some changes.

For instance, Spiegel came on board. He and his family had been longtime friends of Franzblau's wife, Beth. But Ken Spiegel and Carlo Franzblau hadn't met until their families had dinner together after Spiegel and his family moved to Tampa for another job.

Spiegel, 46, a veteran of software development and other information technology efforts, did some consulting for Franzblau, including writing a business plan, before being hired as vice president last spring.

Spiegel began steering Franzblau away from the familiar direct marketing approach to one geared for software: Singing Coach needed to be in big box stores where people could see it, not just on the Web.

"I'm used to daily sales reports," Franzblau said. "You don't get that in the retail channel."

But he agreed to the move, and the company signed up with Re:Launch, a sales and marketing consulting company in California. Re:Launch president Emily Canty told Franzblau the packaging needed work.

It was too plain. It needed to stand out. The second version wasn't much better, but the third, with pictures of people singing and a more complete explanation of the software, worked.

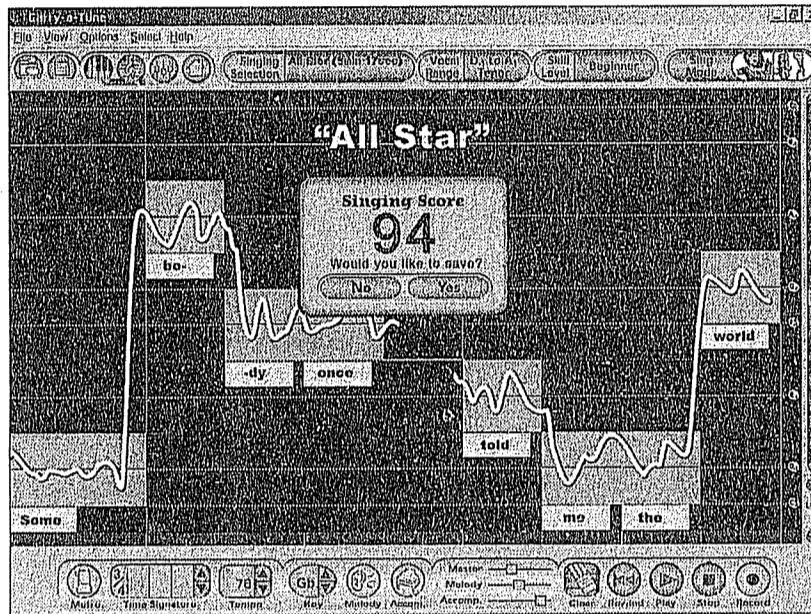
Re:Launch got the Singing Coach into Fry's Electronics, a major electronics retailer in the West, as well as some CompUSA stores. A demonstration event was held at J&R Music in New York in December.

It also was time for Carry-a-Tune Technologies to hire a public relations firm. It hired KCSA Worldwide in New York in the fall, again after an acquaintance helped open doors for Franzblau. One of KCSA's first questions: "Are you going to CES?" Franzblau's answer: "Should we?"

Spiegel and Franzblau knew they had a unique product.

"What we wanted from (CES) was an entry into the national spotlight," Spiegel said.

As part of the deal, Franzblau insisted that KCSA's managing partner, Henry Feintuch, accompany them to the show, which ran Jan. 6 to 9. "He was the experienced hand," Franzblau



Times photo — THOMAS M. GOETHE

The Singing Coach software uses voice measurements to grade people as they sing songs like Smash Mouth's *All Star*, giving users a score at the end of each song, but its prospects go beyond voice lessons.

Software's instant feedback points voice toward perfect

It's a bold promise: Anyone, even the tone deaf, can learn to sing using Carry-a-Tune Technologies' Singing Coach software.

The program comes in two versions. The basic software is \$50, but for twice that price Singing Coach Unlimited allows users to compose songs and import other digital music. Both versions include a microphone. Once the program registers the user's vocal range, it has a playlist (12 songs in the basic version) to begin the lessons.

said. "He had a feel for the product."

Then started a preshow blitz. About 6,000 postcards were sent to music retailers in the late fall. E-mails and follow-up phone calls to the media led up to the show.

Initially, they thought the *New York Times* would have a story around Christmas, but nothing. "That was disappointing," Franzblau said.

Franzblau signed up for ShowStoppers, a private, invitation-only event for media and analysts where companies pay to show their wares and gain access to potential coverage. Franzblau didn't break out the cost of participating in ShowStoppers.

It was held the first night of the trade show in a ballroom at the MGM Grand, the same day the *New York Times*' article appeared in its Circuits section.

"We were on fire at ShowStoppers," Spiegel said. "I didn't know what it was going to be."

Carry-a-Tune did not have an ideal location at the show, but with 120,000 on hand, crowds were everywhere.

If things got slow around the booth, Ally White, a vocal coach and aspiring professional singer from Nashville who is the company's on-staff singer, or John Parker, the company's sound engineer, kicked into a song.

The music, and the display of lyrics with the singing score on a 42-inch LCD screen, almost always drew

More songs are available for download from the company's Web site (www.carryatune.com).

As the person sings, the program follows the pitch on the computer screen, making color-coded lines that follow the song.

Hit the right note, the score increases and lets you move on to the next lesson. Miss, and you try again.

The program is Windows only and available at the Web site.

— DAVE GUSSOW, Times staff writer

onlookers. Franzblau checked their reaction, from the eyes to the expressions to the body language. He knew when they were hooked.

He gave out a lot of family cigars, more bubble gum than real, and the company got used to the attention.

"I never gave an on-camera interview," Spiegel said. "Now I'm comfortable."

And it wasn't bad for an investment of about \$20,000 for show-related costs.

A personal mission

The idea was born at a summer camp production of the musical *Bye Bye Birdie* when Franzblau was a teenager. He got the lead role as Conrad Birdie.

Franzblau, now 45, could sing well enough when he was right next to a piano, but when the piano moved farther away for rehearsals, "I didn't have a clue."

To overcome the problem, the organizers had the cast mob Franzblau on stage any time he began to sing. From then on, Franzblau thought, there had to be a way to teach people to sing.

As the years passed, Franzblau graduated from Harvard (bachelor's and master's of business administration degrees) and entered the work world, and developing an automated singing coach became something of a hobby.

Initially, he envisioned the singing aid as a hardware device. But computing power in the late 1980s wouldn't do what he wanted.

Franzblau talked to a lot of people and checked with companies that might help him develop the idea. Their price tags were too big for his budget. But by 1999, technology had reached a level for Franzblau to pursue his dream.

It took about four years to develop the software and bring the first version to market. Franzblau hired consultants and farmed out much of the work. The company has a staff of eight and is just a small part of the Thompson Group's 500-employee business.

Carry-a-Tune has been financed by Franzblau, his parents and his sister. As a private company, he did not want to say how much he has spent. "If it didn't succeed, it wouldn't be the end of the world financially for me and my family," he said.

Spiegel says it's well-funded and structured so it can become profitable quickly. Franzblau has been spending more time on Carry-a-Tune.

"My wife had three babies," Franzblau said, smiling. "I had one. Hers took nine months. Mine took five years. I try to keep it in perspective."

More than music

While Franzblau was in Las Vegas, his software was getting another boost in Tampa.

Franzblau had given the software to some music teachers in Hillsborough County. One day last year, the mother of one middle school student called the school, checking to see why her daughter's reading had suddenly improved. Turned out she had been using the Singing Coach.

That led Franzblau to Susan Homan, a literacy professor in the department of childhood development at the University of South Florida.

Homan saw potential in the software, so she and graduate student Marie Biggs arranged for a study at West Hernando Middle School.

Students who had been scoring poorly on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test and who disliked school showed dramatic improvement in reading after using the Singing Coach. Some went up a grade level in eight weeks, a couple rose two grade levels.

"I've been in this field for 26 years," Homan said. "I've truly never seen anything like this."

Homan says she believes the repetition needed to master the songs, combined with the students' competitiveness for better singing scores to outperform their peers, has helped their reading.

Spiegel says that's not the only potential use for the software that goes beyond music. He says some call centers are interested in it to help neutralize accents. And the company is thinking about adding specialty products, such as Learn to Sing Country and Learn to Sing Motown.

At the trade show, distributors from Korea, Australia and Israel talked to the company, as well as more U.S. retailers.

"We've got traction," Franzblau said.

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