
American Dream Pays Off

by Bruce Kneeland

As a baby boomer, I have no problem conjuring up memories of the Cold War. Mention it, and the image of Khrushchev banging his shoe at the United Nations, the fear that gripped the country during the Cuban missile crisis, and the pride all Americans felt when the United States beat the Russians in the 1980 Olympics all come to mind.

What's this have to do with you, and why are you reading about this in a pharmacy technology publication? Because two guys who emigrated from the Soviet Union while the Berlin Wall still stood have teamed up to create TeleManager Technologies, Inc., a successful and innovative pharmacy IVR company.

Let me introduce you to Val Gurovich and Paul Kobylevsky. Val is president and chief technology officer, and Paul is executive vice president and chief operating officer. TeleManager was formally organized in 1997 and since then has developed a number of phar-

macy productivity tools that are in use in nearly 2,000 pharmacies.

Gurovich and Kobylevsky have been friends since they met as students in Odessa, Russia. Both were born into working-class Russian families. Gurovich's mother was a school teacher; Kobylevsky's mother a postal worker. Both fathers were industrial engineers. In talking about their early life in Russia, they like to say they were raised in middle-class families, but they quickly add that all families in Russia were officially "middle class," a euphemism for everyone being equally poor. When asked if their fathers had anything to do with building Sputnik (the Russian satellite that started the space race in 1957) they smile and say no, but that everyone they knew was involved in building missiles or rockets of some sort.

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two engineers and led them both to pursue advanced studies in science and technology. Gurovich earned a master's degree in Information systems from the Merchant Marine Academy and Kobylevsky earned a master's degree in industrial engineering from Polytechnic University.

Determination Pays Off

Knowing about their backgrounds makes the entrepreneurial spirit that drives both of them all the more remarkable and helps to explain a little bit about how they have approached the development of their company's products. Today TeleManager is a rapidly growing company with several different approaches to IVR and with formal plans underway to develop even more ways for pharmacists to get more done in less time.

Despite their formal technical training and being put to work in senior positions within the Soviet industrial complex, it seems both

of them soon found that striving to find new and better ways to do things was not an attribute highly valued in the Soviet system. This resulted in frequent “encounters” with the authorities and fueled an unyielding desire for them to escape to the United States. This desire led to even more problems, but their dream was finally realized in the late '80s.

Upon entering the United States, after long and threatening encounters with the Soviet government, they settled in the New York metropolitan area. Both are now U.S. citizens, registered voters, and active supporters of political candidates with a deeper-than-average appreciation for the freedoms we enjoy.

TeleManager is located in Newark, N.J., because Gurovich and Kobylevsky found the telecommunication infrastructure in that area to be among the best in the world, providing access to Internet and telecom hubs; a talented and abundant labor pool and an invitation to join the New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) Science and Technology Development Center adjacent to the Rutgers University campus increased the attraction. NJIT is a magnet for cutting-edge technology firms and having an office there provides TeleManger with a wide range of benefits, not the least of which is being able to network with some of the most innovative companies on the East Coast.

Finding Pharmacy

This all raises the question, how did two engineers from Russia decide to build a pharmacy IVR system? Simple, really. Like many family men Gurovich was frequently given the chore of calling in and picking up prescriptions on his way home from work. Being an



TeleManager founders Val Gurovich and Paul Kobylevsky.

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entrepreneur meant Gurovich was often running late and when he tried to call the refill in, he all too often found himself calling when the store was closed. Remember, this happened back in the mid-1990s, and the pharmacy had no process for recording and retrieving after-hours phone calls.

At this time Gurovich and Kobylevsky were involved in developing hardware and software systems for a company that sold a physician office management system. With this as a starting point Gurovich expressed his frustration to Kobylevsky on how hard it was to call in a prescription refill.

The two started wondering if this was a common problem and if the work they were doing for doctors could be refocused on the pharmacy market. About six months later they installed an IVR prototype in a Manhattan-based pharmacy.

Here's the point in the story where it would be nice to be able to say the system worked, and the rest is history. But remember, we are talking about two engineers from Russia.

And one thing Russian engineers do not get is a lot of training in marketing, pricing theory, and the subtleties of trade show sales.

Always a Little Luck in the Mix

To get to the next step, two things happened: the first, as in any good American success story, involved hard work and luck; the second involved reaching out and finding people with the experience needed to effectively market their new invention.

First about hard work and luck. Gurovich and Kobylevsky continued to work on and improve the functionality of their system. One critical personal characteristic that has served them well is their absolute passion for getting things to work right and for their systems to be simple, effective, and flexible. This notion led theirs to be among the first pharmacy IVR automation firms to adopt the Windows operating system. Windows made it possible for them to develop a user-friendly and functional graphical user interface that even today is a unique feature of TeleManager's IVR systems.

Now for luck. The big break for

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TeleManager occurred in 1998. Gurovich had been working on a project for Seiko, the watch company. In talking with a senior Seiko manager about other things, Gurovich mentioned the work his company was doing in pharmacy. The Seiko manager happened to be a relative of the owner of Neuman Distributors, a large family-owned drug wholesaler in the mid-Atlantic region. Introductions were made, and within a few months a comarketing agreement was reached — with Neuman helping to sell the TeleManager IVR system to its small chain and independent customer base. A few months later Gurovich and Kobylevsky attended their first wholesaler trade show.

After meeting with sales resistance from some key customers over capital acquisition cost and fear of using traditional in-store IVR systems, the team came up with and patented an idea and process that has become the core of what is expected to be the future of their company, the TeleManager IVR On-Demand service.

The Marketing Challenge

As other marketing problems and opportunities presented themselves Gurovich and Kobylevsky soon realized they needed help. So, what do two engineers from Russia do when they know they need sales and marketing help? They go out and hire a Harvard M.B.A.

Joe Caruso is a charismatic and energetic manager who has an impressive background in helping start-up firms. Since graduating from Harvard in 1992, he has worked for a number of companies. One of them was a Boston-based management consulting firm that provided strategic business development support to com-

panies in the electronics, communications, and software development area. This background especially appealed to Gurovich and Kobylevsky so they hired him in 2002. Immediately upon joining the company Caruso went to work and formalized sales materials, organized a coherent marketing approach, and started calling on key leaders in pharmacy.

As Caruso went out to market the TeleManager in-store IVR system, he found that the cost of purchasing a fully functional system could be a significant barrier, especially to small drug chains that needed to purchase several units. Additionally, as TeleManager continued its marketing efforts toward independent pharmacies, it found that many of the independents had an innate resistance to purchasing an IVR. Many said they felt their competitive advantage revolved around personal service and that they weren't sure their customers would appreciate calling the pharmacy and having a computer answer the phone.

Building upon their diverse backgrounds and thinking outside the box, the new senior management team at TeleManager began to get serious about further improving and actively selling its patented and centrally hosted application service provider (ASP) IVR. Gurovich, Kobylevsky, and Caruso felt that if they could do this, they would be able to overcome the two most common obstacles to their sales: substantial capital acquisition cost and the practice of having the IVR handle all incoming calls.

Today, TeleManager IVR On-Demand is the fastest-growing product in the suite of products TeleManager provides.



Joe Caruso

Building on his background in the technology sector and capitalizing on his sales and marketing skills, Caruso authored an article published in this magazine in the May/June 2003 issue touting the advantages of ASP services. The article documented the emerging trends and recent success of other industries in adopting an ASP model and opened the door for TeleManager to make its case with several pharmacies. Perhaps the most notable is the TeleManager relationship with the Hannaford Brothers and Food Lion supermarket pharmacies. Both of these regional chains have purchased all of the various TeleManager IVR solutions, including Refill NetManager which allows patients to refill prescriptions over the Internet whether the pharmacy has a web page or not.

For those of us old enough to remember it the Cold War was a challenging time. We can all be grateful that those days are behind us. True, today's global business climate provides us with new challenges and threats, but we can be glad that two Russian engineers were able to escape from the Soviet Union and make their way to this country where they are using their technical expertise and their entrepreneur spirit to build a company that is helping pharmacists do their jobs more effectively. Yes, it is great to be an American! **CT**

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writes about current issues in pharmacy. He can be reached at bruce@pharmacyconnections.com.