Mr. Potts, what is the idea behind rSmart?

Mr. Potts: We like to joke that we are a seventeen-year-old startup company. We have always been focused on higher education. Our goal from the beginning has been to use technology to improve the lives of students and to lower costs. We have always been involved with programs that really meant something to us. We helped to create the Open Source Portfolio Initiative, which became part of the Sakai project. About 12 years ago, we along with Indiana University, created the Kuali Foundation to create open source ERP software. Those are just examples of the type of dedication to higher education we have and the investment we have made. About two years ago, we decided that in order to help Kuali move faster we needed to make some changes and the Kuali Foundation agreed with us. So we split rSmart up at that time and a third of us went off to create a company called KualiCo. We sold off our services business and a small group of us were left to focus on our new offering called OneCampus. We have been working closely with Indiana University and really enjoy that process; so much so that they are looking forward to having us take other products that they create to market.

CEOCFO: What is OneCampus?

Mr. Potts: OneCampus is a service discovery portal. It was originally created by Indiana University over two years ago to replace their legacy...
portal. They had been using a mostly homegrown portal that was difficult to maintain and was very heavy. It took many developers and resources to maintain. So, we started to look at their changing needs. What are people using in their day to day lives? What do they find easy to use? They like to do search. They like to use Google. They use app stores. That was the goal from the beginning; to create an interface that saves people time and gets them to the services and the activities that they need faster. That’s where the software’s catch phrase came from: “search, click, done!”

CEOCFO: What are some of the features? How is it faster? What have you done to make it work the way people expect and value?

Mr. Potts: We actually have research behind this to validate some of these findings. Typically, the problem with the legacy portals is that many times they show a lot of information that honestly is not useful most of the time. Such as, do you need to see your list of courses every time you go onto the site? You know what that is. You want a couple of things a year. What do you really want to do? This is where we work directly with students and faculty and admin. What do you want to do? We want an easy way to search. We use Google every day. We use Google on our phones. We search for things. That is how we find what we want. Therefore, the design from the beginning was very “search first”. That is the mantra behind it; search, click, done. We wanted to give them a search bar—front and center, top of the screen—so they can search for what they want and get to it; whereas with the old systems, the process would usually be more cumbersome, “Okay, I have logged into my portal, but I guess I need to go to the student system? I do not know. Where is the bus schedule?” Maybe the old system has a Google search, but when you do that you get this huge list of results that is just not very valuable. In addition, students have really been a part of this process all along to help design something that was just much more lightweight. We got rid of the portlets and really focused on searching and bringing services to the front so that students can find them quickly. Another example of that is being able to see what is most popular. For example, the system is set up so that as the semester goes on, different items will go to the top of the screen just because that is what other students are using. Therefore, it is a great way to remind yourself, “Oh my gosh, course registration is open,” because all of a sudden it is at the top of the list. Users also find out about other services they were not even aware of, such as Dropbox. Students are surprised, “I didn’t know that I had a free Drop Box account! Why am I not using that?” Schools are often paying for these items and students are not taking advantage of them, because they just don’t know about them.

CEOCFO: Is it fairly easy on a campus to know what a student will ask for or what they are calling a particular service?

Mr. Potts: We do a few things to help make that finding services as easy and intuitive as possible. The first thing is we use tags. As the school sets up their system, which is a very lightweight and quick process, they put in a description of the system and the service. They can also put in things that are behind the scenes: metadata, meta-title, a description, information that helps them to describe it in various ways so that it shows up during the search even when students don’t know the precise term. The other thing that we do is we are not just putting in one link per application. We put in those ten or twenty things that students can get to directly within that application. For a student system, for example, you do not just put in a link to the student system. You put in a link to the
individual item that they may want to look for, such as “grades” or “course catalog”, so it is much more specific to what they are trying to do. Also, because of the search engine optimization that is built into the system, just doing a regular Google search will take advantage of their incredible technology. The search engines are crawling OneCampus every night to dig up that information, so students just doing a regular Google search it is going to come up higher on the list because of that metadata that is being exposed through OneCampus. Finally, we have some analytics around the searching, so that you can actually see what students are searching for, what is getting hits, what is not getting hits and modify your tags based on that so you can be more responsive.

CEOCFO: What has changed as your system has been in use? What have you learned over time that makes it better today than it might have been initially?
Mr. Potts: When we first started working on OneCampus, we thought there would be a lot of usage of it in combination with portals on campus. What we have found is that it’s just not true; that all the schools we are working with want to get away from their legacy portals and we have really embraced that. We see that they don’t like the amount they are spending on those old systems, the amount of time it takes, the number of people it takes to maintain them. By switching to OneCampus, it takes away much of their support needs, because it is just so intuitive. We have done surveys with students and that is what they all say: “No, we don’t need training; we do not need a manual. This is exactly what we do every day! This is great, just let us go!” That has really been fantastic to hear. We have also done monitoring of the amount of time that students spend searching for what they need now, versus the previous system and it shows pretty clearly that the time savings over the course of the semester is certainly dramatic. The other thing we have done to really be responsive since we have gone live with our customers, is that they are very involved with the process of deciding what features to add next. We use a voting system where schools can say, “It would be great if the system did this. It would be great if OneCampus had this feature.” We will add it to the list and everyone who is using the system now gets to vote and really help guide where our priorities are and what comes next. We always have had a very close relationship with colleges and universities and they really appreciate that part of how we work with them.

CEOCFO: Is there a particular type of university that is embracing OneCampus? Is there a particular size or geography or point in their history?
Mr. Potts: No. We literally have a map and you can see where all of our clients are and they are everywhere from Hawaii to Indiana to Florida to Texas to California. It really has not been geographic as this point. Though we are well on our way to having all of the Big Ten schools! However, we are pretty much everywhere geographically. There is an amazing variety in the size of schools. There are big schools like Indiana and Maryland and the entire Hawaii system that are using OneCampus effectively. However, we also have tiny schools with a couple thousand students who are using it just as effectively. The extreme example of that is we have a K-12 school that is using it and they are one of our most aggressive users. Their single IT person maintains OneCampus part-time on his own, and it is amazing to see what he is able to do. In that case, OneCampus is mostly used by parents, but the response has just been amazing, because of how quickly he creates something that really
looks slick and modern. It does not take him a lot of time and he has really made it simpler for his users to get what they need quickly.

CEOCFO: Do you see K-12 as a potential market for you or is there so much to do with universities?
Mr. Potts: Yes. K-12 is definitely another market that we will be looking at. We are focused pretty heavily on higher education right now, but that will certainly be something we look at down the road, as long as it does not take focus from our primary group of schools.

CEOCFO: How are you reaching schools? Are schools actively looking for something better? How would they find you if they are?
Mr. Potts: That has been a real mix as well. Of course, word of mouth is always the best way. That is why I think the Big Ten has been a real interesting group for us, because they all talk to each other and as soon as they see and hear about OneCampus, they contact us quickly and want to get involved. Therefore, word of mouth is one. We do a number of conferences each year and those have been great because once you see the software you just “get it”. It is very simple to understand and the response is very positive: “Oh, that's awesome! I get it! I understand how it works. Let’s figure out how to make it go for us.” It is a very quick process as far as that goes. We also do our fair share of traditional marketing, which gets expected results. Conferences and word of mouth have always been probably two of our better avenues.

CEOCFO: How do you help students or users personalize the experience? Are they able to make it their own?
Mr. Potts: The system was designed, from the beginning, to not require a log in to do most of what you need. Again, the goal is, “Do not get in the student’s way. Do not get in the user’s way. Let them get to what they want to do quickly,” because every extra click, every extra log in, every extra thing they have to do is a frustration point. Therefore, if it is not needed, we try and bypass it. If they do decide to log in there are several things that help them. They have features like favorites, so they can quickly get to the items they user regularly. That’s one feature most commonly used by administrators and faculty who do the same things on a daily basis. They can also add ratings and reviews. That has been a really, really interesting thing, to see how it affects schools. Individual users can say, “This system is great and here is why,” or of course, the opposite; “We don't like this particular service.” Typically, that is because it may not be mobile friendly. That is because it does not go in to some administrative email box. The feedback goes directly to the owners of those systems and helps them make decisions on what they need to be focusing on. We have got a very specific example of that. A school was about to begin development on a replacement for a particular system. However, after using OneCampus they saw the feedback they were getting that showed that people really did not think it was that bad. They had another system that was just getting terrible reviews. Therefore, they decided to focus their resources on that and then help them be more responsive to what their actual students and users were dealing with every day. It certainly does not hurt student retention to show them how responsive schools are being to student needs.

CEOCFO: What is ahead? What will the next year be like for rSmart and OneCampus?
Mr. Potts: We have a list of enhancements we are actively working on. Some of them are pretty important; things like global announcements, being able to do target announcements, being able to pull in more user-specific data from end systems. Plus, adding the ability to give students
basic information about what is going on in the end systems, without overwhelming them with portlets. There is a large list of those features, but we are also looking at additional products to enhance the current system. We have some partnerships that we are working on to add functionality. We also have other systems that Indiana University and other schools have offered that they would like to see added to our list of product offerings. We will be working with these partners closely to get those features added in and really broaden the functionality of the system and enhance it in a way that I think will really get schools excited.

CEOFCO: Do you see potential for security and campus alerts?
Mr. Potts: We do alerts now. There is an API for accessing and updating almost everything in the system. I think all schools are required to have an alert type system and this will interface with that perfectly. If there is something going on campus that is critical then students will get notified of it right away. In terms of more low level alerts like letting a student know about something specific to them, that is being added as well.

CEOFCO: What is the competitive landscape? Are many people venturing into this new territory that you have carved out?
Mr. Potts: That has been interesting, because no, not really. On the one hand we are somewhat in competition with the traditional legacy portals, but we are not a traditional portal. This is such a different thing that as soon as people see it they understand that OneCampus does not have a direct competitor. Clients don’t have to issue RFPs for example, because there is really nothing else like it. OneCampus is quite unique and there really isn’t anything else that I would consider a service discovery portal like this. We do come up against many situations where people are unhappy with their current portals. They are using uPortal or CampusEAI or other system. We often hear that they are not getting the support they need, the products are not being enhanced as quickly as they need, they are too expensive, they require three people just to maintain it; they just cannot afford it anymore, etc. They are really looking for ways to take advantage of their resources in a more effective way. Everyone has budget problems. We are really seeing it dramatically in some states, and that’s why we are doing all we can to help them with a better solution that saves them money and improves student success.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOFCO Magazine