

Meridian Kiosks Leads Way in Self-Service Technology

By [Ted M. Natt Jr.](#)

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Self-service technology has become a fixture in most Americans' lives, to the point that the technology is often taken for granted.

But that is never the case at Meridian Kiosks in Aberdeen.

"These devices are emergent," says Nick Van Wyk, who was hired as CEO two months ago to take the company to the next level. "There is an evolution happening in terms of the perfect storm."

The evolution is being driven on the demand side by educated consumers who are becoming increasingly comfortable with the improved technology, and businesses hit hard by the recession that are conducting thorough cost reviews to identify efficiencies that can improve their bottom line.

On the supply side, companies like Meridian, a leading provider of self-service kiosk solutions, are exploring global opportunities and engaging corporate partners to help clients operate more productively and better serve their customers.

Van Wyk, a native of Zimbabwe, and company founder Chris Gilder, a British citizen, are in Europe this week meeting with potential partners and finalizing plans to enter that market.

"Strong partnerships have been integral to our success in the U.S. and Canada," Van Wyk says. "These existing relationships are bringing us an ever-increasing number of opportunities globally. We are, at this stage, finalizing our discussions and investigations."

Gilder, who now serves as the company's chief innovation officer, says the company is also "looking at potential acquisitions" and mulling a location for its first overseas facility.

"We are currently very open-minded regarding our entry into Europe," he says.

Gilder hired Van Wyk because of his extensive background in technology, most recently as a senior executive responsible for global operations at Red Hat in Raleigh.

"We'd be hard-pressed to find a better fit for Meridian than Nick," Gilder says. "From the moment we gave him a tour of our facilities, it was clear that he understood the vision and the opportunity. We needed someone with Nick's experience and stature in the industry to help us meet this demand and grow the business properly.

"His vast experience in creating channels and business operations will help take us to the next level."

Gilder also recently hired Sheridan Orr, who worked with Van Wyk at Red Hat, to head the company's new marketing department.

"She has done more market research in the past two months than I ever did," says Gilder, adding that the impact of the hires "has been immediate and beyond good for the company."

The stakes are high, because last year, U.S. consumers conducted \$750 billion in transactions at self-service devices, while the retail, hospitality and health care industries invested \$3 billion in the technology.

But the potential is even greater, because the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation (ITIF) estimates that if self-service technology were more widely deployed, the U.S. economy would be \$130 billion larger annually.

"Companies are looking for a new way to empower their customers and employees," Van Wyk says. "Self-service offers the ability to expand services to meet the increasing demands while improving quality. This interlink between people and technology is a rapidly growing space."

Meridian is unique in that it can take clients from concept to completion at its 12-acre campus in Aberdeen, which includes 65,000 square feet of manufacturing and warehouse space.

"Customers can come here and see the whole work flow from the design center to the shipping dock," Orr says.

The company, which has 42 full-time employees and as many as 100 part-time workers depending upon demand, also practices what it preaches. There are kiosks throughout the assembly process that enable employees to find answers to questions without engaging a supervisor.

"We're creating higher-value jobs," Orr says.

Meridian also recently partnered with heavy hitters such as Hewlett-Packard and Intel to open a Self Service Technology Center in Bentonville, Ark., where Walmart is headquartered.

"We're proud of the company we keep," Van Wyk says, "but we're very humbled by our partnerships."

The center is designed to be a focal point for discussions and presentations for self-service opportunities, to bring relevant and affordable solutions to implementation, and to be a test-bed for new innovation.

"It's not a sales center," Van Wyk says. "It's an innovation center. That's why there is a conference room for brainstorming sessions. It's designed to be a hub of business development for the consortium."

The ITIF notes that self-service technology is critical because it enables improvement in the efficiency of a large array of processes in the economy, which in turn enables lower prices and higher wages.

"While self-service technology is widespread, it is still relatively new and will only continue to improve in quality over time," the ITIF says in a report, "Embracing the Self-Service Economy," that it issued last April.

However, the report adds that Congress needs to support the industry.

"Policymakers must avoid enacting policies to restrict self-service while at the same time putting in place appropriate policies to stimulate the self-service economy," the report says.

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