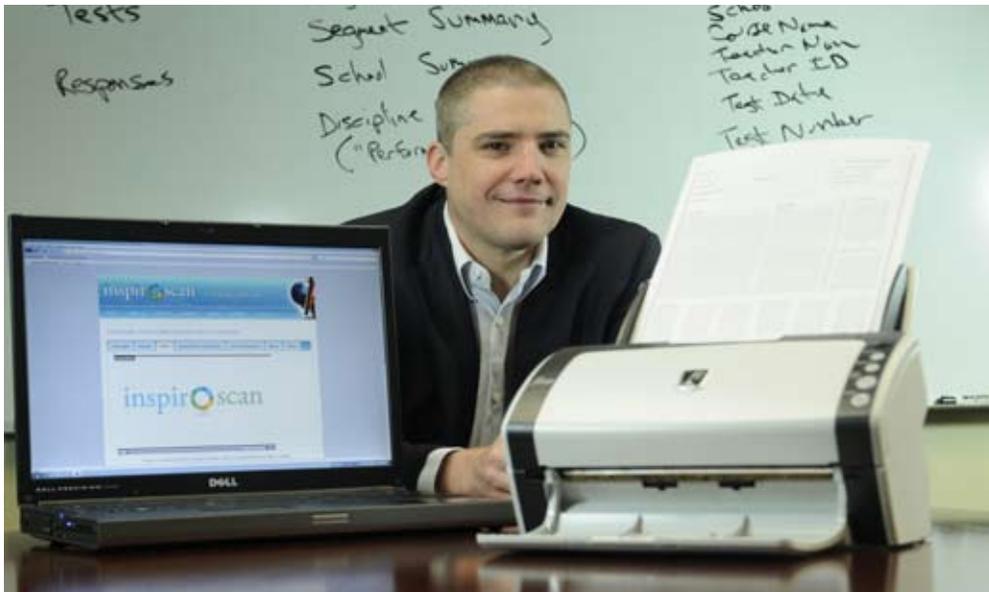


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DENNIS McCOY
SACRAMENTO BUSINESS JOURNAL

Test designer hopes to burst Scantron's bubble

Inspironix launches a test sheet that uses regular paper, equipment

MARK ANDERSON | STAFF WRITER

A Sacramento custom software company hopes to have all the right answers with its first product aimed at the ubiquitous bubble-sheet testing market.

Inspironix's test sheets use off-the-shelf equipment at a fraction of the price of the market leader.

The company has been supporting its Inspiro-scan product at some schools and state agencies and is preparing to launch the product against one of the largest brands in academic testing — Scantron.

"We think we will be able to tell schools some good news: 'We can save you money,'" said Cary Parkins, president of Inspironix.

The Scantron system has been around for decades. Its testing sheets are paired with an answer key and an optical-mark reader in a Scantron system.

The Scantron reader typically costs more than \$5,000 and the individual test sheets have to be bought from the company. Scantron printed forms cost anywhere from a nickel to about 20 cents. The forms also require the use of a No. 2 pencil.

The Inspiroscan software allows a user to create their own forms on blank copy paper. The test can be read on many kinds of scanners and using many kinds and colors of ink or lead.

Inspironix wrote custom software to create forms and then scan those forms using scanners and printers typically available from any office supply store for about \$1,000. In a lot of cases, the businesses or schools already own the equipment.

"The older testing technologies work, but they are dated," said David Marshall, chief operating officer with Action Learning Systems in Sacramento. The company does academic training and testing and data analysis for school districts.

"The old companies are fighting in a digital technology world with a rotary telephone technology," Marshall said, adding that the cachet of a brand name is no match if it is up against a much less expensive and more flexible technology.

"If you are meeting with a school district and they need 10 machines for 10 locations and that is going to cost more than \$50,000, or they might be able to use machines they already have or that cost a couple hundred dollars apiece, well, that is a very short conversation," Marshall said.

Scantron Corp. does not comment on other vendors and their offerings, said Eric Rohy, vice

president of marketing with Scantron.

The Inspiroscan system is now being used at Bakersfield College, Monterey Peninsula College, Rutgers University and Cal Fire, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

Some of the people using the system speak highly of it, but they cannot speak on the record because as state agencies they cannot appear to be endorsing a product. Off the record, those with the schools that use Inspiroscan said it works and they like it.

Because the Inspiroscan product runs off a typical personal computer, it also allows information gleaned from tests to be loaded directly into a spreadsheet program.

More schools are having students do work on computers or personal laptops, but that isn't a good solution for a test environment, where a school or agency doesn't want the test taker to have access to online answers, Parkins said. Cal Fire specifically requires students to take a bubble-sheet test.

"In many applications, the organization offering the test doesn't want the person taking the test to have access to a computer," he said.

Parkins has been writing custom software for more than 20 years, and Inspironix now has nine employees, though it likely will be adding more employees to sell and support the Inspiroscan line.