

# Local business is really clicking

## FAST-GROWING PERMISSION CLICK HAS SEEN USAGE SKYROCKET DURING THE YEAR OF THE PANDEMIC

By: Martin Cash

Posted: 11/5/2020 8:48 PM



RUTH BONNEVILLE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Chris Johnson, founder and CEO of Permission Click, says the Winnipeg company has been well-positioned to help schools with challenges created by COVID-19.

Just like the rest of us, the folks at Permission Click, the Winnipeg digital school form company, were terrified about what the pandemic would mean to their operations.

During the summer, staff helped the province build its HelpNextDoorMB.ca volunteer matching app just to make sure its team stayed busy.

But as September rolled around and schools starting opening, Chris Johnson, the company founder and CEO, quickly realized that in fact, this was Permission Click's time to shine.

The company provides easy to use digital forms and cashless payment collection with all the privacy concerns addressed that can allow schools and districts to meet all their compliance needs.

Founded seven years ago, it has roughly doubled in size every year. But since the beginning of this most unusual of school years, Permission Click's usage has gone up by 8,000 per cent.

And while the company's ability to solicit new business in person has been curtailed because of travel bans, last month it received word that it was one of the winners of a massive request for proposal that will make Permission Click a qualified supplier for all 72 school boards in Ontario.

"This is a big, big deal for us," Johnson said.

While it still has to close deals with the individual school divisions, it is an opportunity that could be worth tens of millions of dollars for the Winnipeg company.

"We're all very appreciative that our business just happens to be well-positioned to helping people respond (to the current crisis)," he said. "We know that it's not the case for every company out there. You can't control luck. It's not lost on us."

And it so happened that demand spiked when Permission Click's concept was fully proven with millions of users already activated.

Schools across North America — about 60 per cent of Permission Click's business is in the U.S. — are scrambling to figure out safe ways to communicate with families while the coronavirus spreads through communities. Permission Click can help.

The Ontario opportunity was months in the making with the hundreds-pages-long RFP issued late last year. But it was very timely.

Sonia Gallo, director of customer relationship management for OECM (Ontario Education Collaborative Marketplace), said, "From OECM's perspective and based on the knowledge we've gathered from our customers, the COVID-19 pandemic has expedited the need for cashless transaction management solutions and services, such as those offered by Permission Click. We're aware of schools switching to cashless schemes to support health and safety protocols as well as reduce administrative costs and paperwork."

The company had been making headway here at home from Winnipeg School Division and Pembina Trails to schools in California and Texas.

The pandemic is forcing the hands of a lot of school divisions who can't have students bringing cash in for any of the myriad of activities that the schools would typically be engaged in.

OECM refers to Permission Click as "the world's leading K-12 risk management partner." While that may sound bureaucratic, what it means is that Permission Click offers more than emailed permission slips.

With robust cloud computing power, forms can be pre-populated with all the pertinent information accessed through information already provided so parents can receive information already personalized.

Johnson, who was one of the founders of North Forge Technology Exchange, has said in the past if he knew ahead of time all of the regulatory and compliance details he'd have to deal with he might have chosen another market to address rather than education.

But now that he's got a well-oiled machine he is excited to meet the current demand.

"It's more than just digitizing," he said. "There are safety issues now and we can help schools recover time so they can free-up people to do other things they have to do. In one school we saved an entire FTE (full-time equivalent position) with just one form."

The urgent demand has meant Johnson could no longer put off re-organizing his sales and marketing team and is now trying to fill six positions at once, increasing his 15-person team by almost 50 per cent.

Even with the huge growth, the market remains largely untapped. The company raised a couple of million dollars four years ago and since then he has politely declined the entreaties from venture capital and private equity firms who recognize the potential that exists.

Because it's not like schools are going to convert to paperless and cashless systems and then go back to the traditional forms when the pandemic ends.

Johnson said, "We do think this is the tip of the iceberg."

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## **Martin Cash**

*Reporter*

Martin Cash has been writing a column and business news at the Free Press since 1989. Over those years he's written through a number of business cycles and the rise and fall (and rise) in fortunes of many local businesses.

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