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## Scoring Big

Lynx System Developers uses four strategies to sell its high-tech product to a low-tech market.

By Sheila Seifert  
for Office.com

Dec 13, 1999 — The sun was blazing at the Prefontaine Classic, the air was thin, and Track Town fans were screaming their lungs out as a pack of world-class runners strained toward the finish line at

Hayward Field in Eugene, Oregon. Gwyn Coogan was too far back to win, but that didn't matter to the seasoned U.S. Olympian and marathon champion. She gracefully stretched her body across the finish line. Then, panting, she glanced toward the scoreboard. To her amazement, the entire list of runners was displayed — in sequential order by finishing time! "I was surprised," she recalls. "Usually times are listed by starting order, and it was always hard to determine the qualifying time I needed to be able to run the 1,500 meter at nationals."

The technology that made this miracle possible was engineered by [Lynx System Developers, Inc.](#), a small, seven year-old, privately owned company. Its ability to collect and distribute data through FinishLynx, a digital image system, CyberScoreboard, an Internet real-time results publishing system, and FieldLynx, a handheld data collection instrument, is the most innovative in the sports industry, according to Fred Patton, the owner of Phoenix Sports Technology, a provider of timing services. Lynx products can determine winners to two thousandths of a second, and for the last seven years they have been the official timing system for many events produced by NBC, CBS, ESPN, and EuroSport.

The company was founded in 1991 by Douglas DeAngelis, still its president. DeAngelis says, "As a track and field participant and an engineering student at MIT, I decided that there was a better way to record scores. In the old days, you took a photo, developed it, and then someone manually wrote the results that were handed to someone on the scoreboard. The core element that no one else had yet realized was the electronic connection of what generated the data to what distributed it."

### At a Glance

**Name:** Lynx System Developers, Inc.  
**URL:** [www.finishlynx.com](http://www.finishlynx.com)  
**Location:** Woburn, Mass.  
**Founder:** Douglas DeAngelis  
**Founded:** 1991  
**Industry:** Sports technology  
**Employees:** N/A  
**Revenue:** N/A

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However, there's more to Lynx's success than a better set of sports gadgets. Lynx used four core strategies to grow from a single-man operation to the small but successful organization it is today: beta testing, mass customization, customer education, and feedback-gathering. These strategies, pertinent to every small business, have helped Lynx capitalize on its innovative products.

### **Promotional Beta Testing**

Although Lynx has long been visible at Olympic events, national championships and international competitions, the company's prime target market is high schools and colleges. As a small, self-funded, engineering company, Lynx needed to figure out how to get its product to market without a formal marketing plan or a huge budget for promotion. Its solution was to use beta testing as a promotional technique — a strategy other small businesses might consider. The company acquired a small number of beta testers for each product in schools throughout the United States, and individual coaches became Lynx's best promoters. Lynx products virtually sold themselves once they were seen in use by the industry.

Ken Jakalski, the track and field coach at Lisle High School in Illinois, says, "Whenever we used FinishLynx, other coaches would ask about it. I would tell them how the products worked and how much time we saved at each meet. Those of us who use Lynx products can't say enough good things about them." Through its beta testers, the company has achieved impressive market penetration.

### **"Mass Customization"**

"From a technical perspective," says DeAngelis, "our approach is to look at any particular vertical, fix what's broken, and partner with what isn't. We may decide the database technology in a sport is okay so then we'll collect the data for them. Or if there is a good scoreboard, then we will help them attain a better organizational tool. We think of sports information as links in a chain. The first thing we do is to fix the broken links to reach a total solution."

Paul Lambert, the CEO of Lynx, adds, "At first we focused on track and field because our founder had the experience in this area. Later we realized that some of the products we had developed related to other sports as well."

According to DeAngelis, Lynx tried to focus on platforms instead of products. "Rather than create a specific application for every sport," he explains, "we applied similar applications to look as if they were specifically made for each sport. This takes a little more work on the front end but pays back so that you don't have to recreate the wheel each time. FinishLynx, our first product, is equally applicable to cycling, horseracing, track and field, and other sports, even though the terminology is different in each. It's sort of like mass customization."

To customize their products for different markets, the people at Lynx began with what they knew — track and field — and then moved into other areas, where they relied on experts to fill them in on specific problems and special requirements. According to Giles Norton, Lynx's director of corporate communication, when a business is small and does not have the resources to venture into additional product lines, it should consider focusing on a successful product and figuring out how it can be sold on other platforms and in other industries. "The beauty of the way our system is set up," he adds, "is that we don't spend a lot of time developing things that people don't want."

### Customer Education

Lynx' primary competition was not another company, but the technophobia of its potential customers. Jennifer Gruenberg, the sponsorship coordinator for the Syracuse Chargers Rowing Club, used FinishLynx for the U.S. Rowing Club National Championship's Regatta. "Before FinishLynx," she says, "people would sit on the shore and call out each boat's bow number. The onshore officials then coordinated stopwatch offsets and calculated finish times. At the Regatta, FinishLynx had the results posted in hard copy before the onshore officials had theirs handed to the US Rowing staff." But even with the accuracy and immediacy of the new technology, it can be hard to get people to change their old ways of working. "Many people still prefer to trust their binoculars and stopwatches," says Gruenberg.

One way Lynx hopes to beat this problem is through demonstrating its products. In the long term, Lynx hopes that the sports industry will adopt its new technologies, especially with enthusiastic recommendations from supporters within. In the meantime, Lynx maintains a high profile for its products among athletes through a variety of events such as the Tour de France, the World Short Track Speed Skating Championship, and the Olympics.

### Listening to the Future

One of Lynx's strong suits is its ability to listen. Before it moves onto a new platform, Lynx first identifies the experts and then listens to what they have to say about their sport.

A perfect example of how this process works comes from Ford Cook, the operations director of photo and timing for Televue Racing Patrol, Inc. "My company has been in the racing industry for 35 years," he says. "Television, photo, etc. When I saw what Lynx did with track and field, I contacted them because nothing was comparable. They came and listened to what I really needed in the horseracing industry. With Lynx, my company's been able to go from a film developing system to a computer system overnight. Their products even cut the cost to racetracks tremendously."

In the same way, Lynx works to make itself available to clients — every hour of every day. Giles Norton explains: "Part of listening is being there when they need you. Our client base drives our growth. If a client is in Hawaii and they have a problem, they need to talk with someone even if it's 4 a.m. our time. We take the time to talk to them about their data collection and get them back on track." And, of course, Lynx provides 24/7 tech support.

Ford Cook continues, "I've never met a company like them. It's like I have a family member in the business. They service their clients, and when I get something from them, I don't have to worry if it's going to work. "

However quickly or slowly the sports industry adopts its products, it seems clear that Lynx has more than just customers — it has fans. As Gwyn Coogan says, "I saw the picture Lynx made of Regina Jacobs crossing the finish line as she set an American record. I sent them a letter saying that I hope they are the ones who time my race when I break the world record. I can't think of a better way to be timed."

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