Stuart Pocklington's "Dream" Sparks a Winning Alexa Skill Idea and a New Career in Voice

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Alexa   Alexa Skills Kit   Developer Spotlight   Multimodal

A solutions developer in the energy industry, Stuart Pocklington never imagined he would find a career in voice. Fascinated by Echo technology, he soon found himself spending his spare time learning about the Alexa Skills Kit. But when Amazon announced the Alexa Skill Challenge: Multimodal, he knew it was time to stretch himself to build a multimodal skill that combined voice, visuals, and touch for an engaging customer experience. A few months later, Loop It! earned Pocklington the grand prize in the contest and $25,000.

"When I found out I won, I had my wife read the email because I wanted to make sure I wasn't imagining it," says Pocklington. "My wife was crying and I was jumping and celebrating."

To rise to the challenge, Pocklington dove deep into the Alexa Presentation Language (APL). APL allows developers to add visual and touch elements to make their skills more delightful and engaging for customers with Alexa-enabled devices with screens of different sizes and shapes, such as Echo Spot, Echo Show, and Fire TV. Loop It! is a voice-first skill that works seamlessly on Alexa-enabled devices without screens such as Echo Dots, but Pocklington says APL let him put the "icing on the cake" that led to his victory. The experience has encouraged him to push forward with his own business, SoapVox, building Alexa skills for brands and businesses that want to use voice technology to promote their companies.

"I'm excited about the potential for voice. It's like the world wide web in its early days," says Pocklington. "Voice has the potential to change how we interact with technology. I want to be one of the people who helps to shape and grow it. That's why I'm building a business and career in voice."

A Dream Come True: Inspiration for an Award-Winning Skill

With over a dozen published Alexa skills, Pocklington was excited about the multimodal Alexa Skills Challenge and eager to try it. He was still trying to come up with a winning idea for his skill, when true inspiration came to him during a fateful night's sleep.

"One morning I woke up after having a vivid dream about Loop It!—even the name came to me in the dream," says Pocklington. "I dreamed of building an Alexa skill, using APL, and bringing in some music creation elements. I literally woke up, went downstairs, got my computer open, and started working on it."
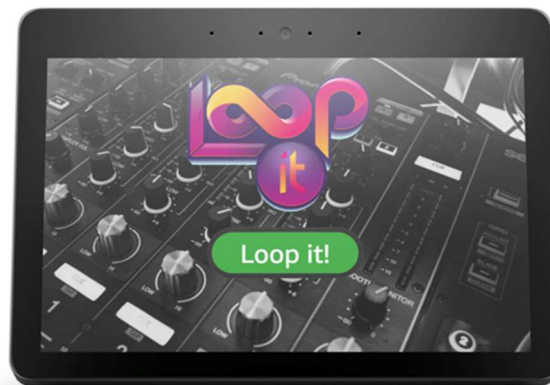
Loop It! lets the customer create their own great sounding music loops in less than a minute, even with no prior musical experience. They select from various drum lines, bass lines, and melody lines, then combine the chosen music loops into a soundtrack. Currently Pocklington's skill provides two loop packs, each with the ability to create 27 different loops. Both the voice-only and multimodal experiences were so engaging, the skill earned Pocklington the Grand Prize of $20,000, another $5,000 for being a finalist, and a new Echo Dot and Fire TV Stick 4K bundle for participating in the challenge.

"It felt like a life-changing event for me," says Pocklington. "I'm grateful that I entered the competition, and that I took the time to network with the Alexa developer community who could help me along the way."

APL Turns a Voice-First Skill into an Engaging Multimodal Experience

While Loop It! lets customers create catchy musical masterpieces by combining audio loops of their choice, the goal of the Alexa Skills Challenge: Multimodal was to inspire developers to make a great voice-first experience even more engaging by adding visual elements with APL.

Thanks to APL, Pocklington was able to build a voice-first visual experience optimized to take advantage of the characteristics of Alexa-enabled devices with screens, such as size of screen and which room it's in. The visual elements on the screen enrich the experience by showing images that represent what the customer is doing in the skill. For example, when the customer is choosing a bass loop, APL displays an image of a bass guitar on the screen. He also incorporated TouchWrappers, allowing customers to select their choices by touching their device screens, if they choose to do so.

Designed to be easy to use, customers can create and play back an audio loop in less than a minute. They can also tweak, change, and recreate their loops again, which keeps the skill fresh.

"I wanted to make the Loop It! experience compelling enough to be a winner," says Pocklington. "I made it simple to understand and use, balanced the use of rich audio and visual elements, and optimized it for different screen sizes. But mainly I tried to build an experience that would enable customers to love the audio loops they create and enjoy using the skill."

Pocklington felt it was important to balance the visual elements to complement his skill, without detracting from the voice experience. He achieved that by designing, building, and testing the skill first as a voice-only skill, before using APL to enhance it with visual and touch elements. Customers love the results, telling Pocklington the skill is "great fun that keeps you wanting to come back for more."

The Future of Voice Looks Bright for Pocklington, Loop It!, and SoapVox

Pocklington says he plans to keep enhancing Loop It! to keep it fun and fresh. He also plans to release the skill in German, Spanish, French, and Italian. Thanks to feedback he's received via both the Alexa Skills Store and emails from customers, Pocklington also has ideas for monetizing the skill. Customers tell Pocklington they look forward to trying more loops in the future, so he's considering adding Premium Loop Packs as in-skill purchases to offer more choices and genres of music, such as dance, country, jazz, punk, and metal. Another requested premium feature might allow customers to save and share their favorite loops, as well as add voice-over to their loops.

"The premium packs will give customers a 'backstage access' to all areas of the skill," says Pocklington. "Almost like a VIP experience within the skill."

Loop It! and Pocklington's previously published skills are just the beginning for the grand prize winner. His success so far has only made him more excited about the growing opportunities Alexa offers to developers. Though currently still employed full time in the energy industry, Pocklington has set a personal goal to fully pivot to voice development and his new voice business, SoapVox, by December 2020.

"Voice is a game changer in how people interact with technology," says Pocklington. "From older generations—like my Dad, who uses Alexa every day but not a computer— to families, to brands and businesses getting into the voice space for promotion. The opportunities are there, and they are growing. The time to get involved is now."