Vcom3D's iPod translator device is a valuable tool for U.S. soldiers

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An Orlando company's translator program for Apple's iPod got its start years ago as a way to teach sign language to students. Today, it helps U.S. soldiers in the war-torn Middle East and United Nations peacekeepers on the Horn of Africa.

Vcom3D Inc. has made quite a leap since it began making educational software for the hearing-impaired. The high-tech company's first foray into the defense sector has turned into a lucrative enterprise, with more sales in the pipeline.

"It is a significant, growing business," said Carol Wideman, Vcom3D's president. "We have received many orders from the Army for Iraq and Afghanistan. We've sold it for the joint deployment in Sudan. Longer-term, we also see potential applications for the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps."

The military's use of the translators has increased fivefold since they were first deployed by the Army in late 2007, Wideman said. About 1,000 have been sold to various agencies -- half of them to the Army's Orlando-based training-systems agency, which equips soldiers stationed around the world.

To date, the training agency -- Vcom3D's biggest customer -- has spent nearly $2 million on the devices and support equipment. More than 500 have been sent to war zones, said Kristen McCullough, spokeswoman for the Army training agency. The devices have also been sent to the U.S.

Rapid Response Equipping Force, which supplied the U.N. peacekeepers in Sudan, she said.

Dubbed the "Vcommunicator," the iPod-translator has received favorable reviews from both those in the field and those in the industry. It was included on a list of the military's most promising new technologies in a recent survey by National Defense Magazine, a publication of the National Defense Industrial Association.

"A shortage of Arab-speaking interpreters has been a huge hindrance for U.S. troops in the Middle East," the publication said. "The Army tested several translation devices, but none was as successful as the (Vcom3D) iPod."

Although the military acknowledges that no technology can replace a real interpreter, the relatively inexpensive Vcommunicator is playing an increasingly important role in operations abroad, according to the local Army training-systems agency.

Soldiers can use it to learn languages -- such as Iraqi Arabic, Pashtu or Dari -- or to communicate directly with locals during tactical or intelligence-gathering operations. It is loaded with voice files of phrases commonly used in various military operations. The soldier using one can select a mission, choose an English phrase and display a computer-animated figure that speaks it in the desired native language, with accents and gestures specific to the culture. The soldier can also reverse-translate responses from the locals.

Soldiers on patrol can wear the device and link it to a small speaker. At vehicle-security checkpoints, it can be connected to a loudspeaker or large projection screen. "We're getting some great feedback from the soldiers about how it is making a difference, in some cases even potentially saving lives," Vcom3D's Wideman said.

The device's ease of use has been one of its most appealing features, especially among younger soldiers, she said. Designed for use with the familiar iPod nano, it is simple to operate, even though the software is based on in-depth linguistic and cultural research to ensure accuracy.

The newest version of Vcom3D's software also works on the iPod Touch, a more robust device, Wideman said. "Taking it from the nano to the Touch makes it possible to put all kinds of other applications on the device, such as maintenance, communications, mapping and logistics training," she said.

Vcom3D's nonmilitary work is also thriving.

Its Sign4Me sign-language app is a big seller for use with Apple's iPod Touch and iPhone; customers now include dozens of universities and government agencies. Most recently, the company won a $75,000 small-business research grant to develop math-skills software for the deaf.

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