



## OUR BIG IDEA SCREENREADER.NET

GIVING your product away to anyone who wants it is certainly an atypical business model, but for Roger and Margaret Wilson-Hinds, it was the pivotal decision that turned their screenreader idea into a commercial reality.

The Wilson-Hinds, both blind since birth, were busily running a disability training company having won a government contract to teach blind people to use computers. Then, in 1998, Roger was found to have cancer, forcing the couple to quit the business and give it to a close friend.

During the ensuing treatment the Wilson-Hinds realised that, although programmes that could scan text on a computer screen and read it back to the user were available, the typical £700-£800

software packages were beyond the pocket of the majority of the world's blind community and they became determined to produce a low-cost alternative.

At 60 most people are contemplating a quieter life, but fuelled by the idea of "opening up information literacy to blind people anywhere", in 2000 Roger enrolled himself and his wife on a course for social entrepreneurs instead.

Having self-funded the product's development, the screenreader, called Thunder, was finally ready for market, but, after a few years of trying to sell it at low cost, the take-up was slow.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time, but low-cost is often seen as inferior and it wasn't until we studied the Google model and

embraced the notion of 'free to the end user' that things really got moving," Roger says.

Immediately the product became available free, a German company with links to the European Blind Union got in touch and, two months later, the Wilson-Hinds were in receipt of an EU grant of €240,000 (£190,000) to fund French, Italian, German, Slovak and Estonian versions of Thunder. Since then, more funding has been forthcoming, a version specifically for people with learning difficulties is in development and, with almost 100,000 users, the company now advises businesses on how to make their websites available to this untapped market.  
[www.screenreader.net](http://www.screenreader.net)  
**MARK BARBER**