

## The story behind tech's idea capitalist

SHE HANDPICKS INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY TO SHOWCASE AT DEMO SHOW

By Sam Diaz

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It's truly through a twist of fate that Chris Shipley -- raised by a Methodist minister and a school teacher in western Pennsylvania's steel-producing country -- would end up being a Silicon Valley guru, an arbiter of what's hot on the tech horizon.

For the past eight years, Shipley has been the executive producer of the Demo conferences -- exclusive, invitation-only events that have showcased ground-breaking technologies and companies such as TiVo, the original PalmPilot and Salesforce.com, among others.

Call Demo a high-tech farmers market, a place where a small sampling of the tech world's freshest ideas and ventures are gathered and displayed for an audience of connoisseurs -- industry analysts, technology journalists and investors.

It's Shipley, 43, who handpicks the tech start-ups that show their wares at Demo.

She jets around the world -- logging some 125,000 miles annually -- to meet with companies for a first look at their innovations. For each of her twice-a-year Demo conferences, she whittles down the list of hundreds of potential exhibitors to 60 or 70 that are worthy of a make-or-break, six-minute pitch on the Demo stage.

She does it all with a small-town style that has left start-ups trusting that her show will be the best launching pad for their products.

"She's extremely down-to-earth," said Soujanya Bhumkar, co-founder of Vazu, a Palo Alto start-up that launched itself and its VazuClick Phone-to-PC synchronization software at a Demo show last year. "She sees a lot and is so knowledgeable, yet she's willing to meet with a small start-up like us."

Shipley immediately liked Vazu's idea -- and that's what she's always on the hunt for: smart ideas, not necessarily successful companies.

"What I'm looking for are fresh ideas that stimulate the markets, create new markets, change markets, add competition, all of these change-agent kind of criteria," she said.

Unlike the big, glitzy trade shows like Comdex or the Consumer Electronics Show, the Demo conferences, held every February and September, are small and intimate gatherings. They take place at resort hotels in places like La Jolla or Scottsdale, Ariz.

Shipley intentionally chooses tight-knit quarters to help the start-ups with networking. A tech entrepreneur or innovator at Demo is likely to bump into a venture capitalist or a CEO in the elevator or the buffet line.

"I'm trying to create a community here, where folks are encouraged to eat in the same restaurants and go to the event dinners. Sometimes, that's where things happen," said Shipley, who grew up in Scottsdale, Penn., a town of about 4,500.

It's almost as if she's carrying on the tradition of her late father, the Methodist minister, said longtime friend Susan Thomas.

"The concept of ministering to a community is part of what Chris does with the technology community," Thomas said. "It's an incredible amount of pressure, but Chris has a very even temperament."

But it's the companies she picks that face the most intense pressure.

For example, Mountain View's ByteMobile, which launched its software for speeding up mobile workers' access to corporate networks at a 2003 Demo conference, knows first-hand about the grueling preparations for Demo. Every exhibiting company is given six minutes on stage for a live demonstration -- in front of potential investors and influential analysts and journalists.

"It's like getting ready for a play," said Dave Nowicki, ByteMobile's vice president of product management and marketing. "You have to write a script, figure out what you're doing and you have to practice. We practiced for weeks and weeks and weeks."

### **Sprint impressed**

A Sprint executive, who was a speaker at the 2003 show, was impressed by ByteMobile's presentation. In a matter of months, Sprint tested and endorsed ByteMobile's product.

"Now they're out there selling it in the marketplace," Nowicki said. "That was a great win for us to connect with a carrier the size of Sprint. It was terrific exposure for us."

As the one who decides which companies make the cut, Shipley has felt her share of pressure, as well.

"At one time, it was really nerve-racking -- what if I make the wrong choice?" she said. "I still have some of that anxiety. I'm talking to a marketplace filled with really smart people with a lot of money to invest who are taking a lot of time out to come to these events, and I'm just a small-town girl from Pennsylvania."

It's not a bad gig, considering she ended up in the Demo chair through what she called "a series of dumb-luck choices."

Shipley, who had been a journalist at tech trade magazines, was offered the Demo job in 1997 by Stewart Alsop, who had founded the show in 1990 but had taken a lesser role to concentrate on being editor of InfoWorld magazine.

"The reputation that the conference had at that time was that it was a lot of fun and a bit crazy," said Alsop, now a venture capitalist. "It needed someone who could also understand how businesses are developed, not just have fun."

Shipley says that her biggest mark on the show, which is owned by International Data Group, has been instituting a requirement in 1998 that all products showcased at Demo also be introduced there. The change shifted Demo's emphasis from big companies to start-ups.

The change turned out to be a lifesaver for Demo, which easily could have fallen victim to the same economic forces that killed off the once-mighty Comdex.

### **Demo survived**

"It's really significant that Demo survived, and you get the same basic feeling that people are still working on innovative products. It proves that Demo is the place to market the progress of the industry," said Alsop.

He added: "I just came up with the idea, but Chris made it a real conference."

And Shipley has become increasingly confident over the years about the selections she makes.

“What I've learned to trust is what a friend of mine once characterized as ‘informed instinct,’” she said. “I spend all my time talking to small companies. . . I think that 20-plus years of looking at technology companies gives me some license to say ‘That's really different.’”

If not, Shipley can always count on the reaction of her decade-long domestic partner, Nancy Litta, when she comes home excited about something she had seen that day.

“She ends up being this barometer for me,” Shipley said. “She says something like ‘I haven't seen you get excited about a company since. . .’”

And as plugged-in to the tech scene as Shipley is, her life isn't controlled by it.

The many books around her Redwood City home offer hints that she spends time gardening, fixing up the house, traveling to exotic places and training a lively pooch named Mojita del Medio del Noche.

Shipley also studies martial arts, loves to bake unique birthday cakes for her friend Susan Thomas' daughter Andrea -- the most recent one in the shape of a volcano -- and spends time after every Demo show on a scuba diving vacations, which have taken her to the Fiji Islands, the Galapagos Islands and Taiwan, among other places.

Those places, as well as Silicon Valley, are worlds away from Scottsdale, the small Pennsylvania town where Chris grew up. Her minister father, Ralph, who died in February, was the first in his family to go to college and instilled the importance of education and success in his five children. “Slacking off was a bad thing,” Shipley said. “We were all expected to achieve. He never doubted for a minute that we'd be smart, capable and creative.”

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