

Local entrepreneurs learn to 'fast pitch' ideas

Mary Carr Mayle | Sunday, October 12, 2008 at 12:30 am

A dozen eager entrepreneurs had three minutes each to sell their business ideas to a group of savvy angel investors Friday morning as Ariel Savannah Angel Partners LLC and The Creative Coast Alliance sponsored their first "FastPITCH" competition.

Held in conjunction with the national Angel Capital Association's regional conference this week at the Westin Savannah Harbor, the competition was not so much about obtaining capital funding as it was about giving budding local entrepreneurs the exposure, experience and mentoring to turn their ideas into fundable businesses down the road.

It was something of a trial by fire - no visual aids, no opportunity for Q and A. Just 180 seconds to pitch the product near and dear to each of their hearts.

And not to just any audience.

Listening intently to each presenter were some 100 angel investors representing 22 groups from five states - experienced investors ready to offer the fledgling companies invaluable coaching, expert advice and seasoned guidance on how to best obtain financing for their business, develop their venture, and introduce their product into the marketplace.

The pitches they heard ran the gamut from a new energy drink to geothermal ground heat exchangers, from a stretchable rubber clock to simulation software for cancer treatment.

Seven judges ranked each category of presenters - there were four student, two faculty and six independent entrepreneurs, culled from more than 30 original entrants - according to two criteria: the quality of the presentation and the extent to which the idea had investor appeal.

Pizzeria, film studio, info ticker top ideas

Topping the student category was Savannahian Selia Mitchell, a student at American Intercontinental University in Atlanta. Her idea? The Brick House Pizzeria - "a place where young adults can find food for the body, mind and soul."

Savannah College of Art and Design professor Hal Miles took top honors in the faculty competition with "Hal Miles Imagination Studio Inc.," a full-production film development studio that will include "the world's largest soundstage, compartmentalized to accommodate everything from commercials to full-length feature films.

"Major film and entertainment firms frequently come to Savannah to shoot movies for a short period of time but have to go elsewhere for the remainder of their production due to the lack of local facilities and soundstages," Miles said. "Our goal is to make Savannah a full-service production locale."

Several of the half-dozen independent entrepreneurs presenting their pitches were veterans of the process, including the category winner, Bob Nunnally of Balaya LLC, whose patent-pending product Tick-it "helps businesses and social groups connect and communicate more effectively and efficiently."

Nunnally predicted Tick-it - which offers a running information ticker that appears on monitors and mobile-device displays similar to a TV newscast ticker, but it is private and presented only to members of the group using it - is poised to "revolutionize the newspaper industry" by providing a social-media platform for custom-targeted news and other information.

Everyone's a winner

While there were winners Friday, event organizer Ervin Williams, director of Ariel Savannah Angel Partners and Entrepreneur in Residence at Savannah State University, was quick to point out that there were no losers.

"Every one of our finalists will get a nominal monetary award, with the winners receiving somewhere in the neighborhood of \$400," he said.

But the big payoff?

"ASAP will assign an angel mentor to each finalist for a year, providing three to four hours of consultation each month," he said.

"And that's really the fundamental purpose of the competition - to uncover good ideas and mentor those entrepreneurs so they will be ready when the time comes to make that all-important appeal for capital."

Already, the finalists have been given a taste of what they will need to do - they were coached before the competition by Orjan Isacson of Georgia Tech Enterprise Innovation Institute.

"We helped them package their ideas, create a business plan and rehearse a professional presentation that stresses their market potential to investors," Isacson said.

Rick Winger, president of the Savannah Economic Development Authority, said he's especially gratified to see the angel network conference and the FastPITCH competition in Savannah.

"At SEDA, we tend to focus on the large-scale projects," he said. "But 90 percent of American businesses and jobs are created at the private, grassroots level.

"Home-grown companies help us spread the word that Savannah is a great place to do business. What better way to help grow those companies than to introduce people with investment funds to people with ideas."

FastPITCH finalists

Twelve finalists in three categories pitched their ideas to potential investors at Friday's "FastPITCH" competition.

Student entrepreneurs

Ashley Newsome (Savannah College of Art and Design) - "The Haberdashery," a full-service hub for fashion, fibers and textile supplies and material resources focusing mainly on the SCAD student communities as well as offering retail merchandise appealing to the do-it-yourself inclination in the public market.

Charles Heydinger (SCAD) - "Strock: The Stretchable Rubber Clock," a unique design idea that not only stretches time but also your imagination by its innovative use of rubber as the face of a wall clock. The novel appeal of this wall clock is an eye-catching product on and off the shelf that is sure to make conversation.

Joel Davila (Savannah State University) - "Liquid X," an energy drink that offers great taste but doesn't contain potentially harmful ingredients such as Guarana.

Selia Mitchell (American Intercontinental University) - "The Brick House Pizzeria," a restaurant combining food, live music and art in a multicultural atmosphere.

Faculty entrepreneurs

Hal Miles (SCAD) - "Hal Miles Imagination Studio," Savannah's only full-production, film development studio including soundstage facilities that would be open for commercial use.

Felix Hamza-Lup (Armstrong Atlantic State University) - "3DRTT," a Web-based, turnkey 3D simulation software system for clinical radiation therapy planning and medical personnel training in the treatment of cancer.

Community entrepreneurs

Bob Nunnally - "Balaya LLC," an integrated suite of tools that allow companies to leverage the power of Social Media to meet internal and external business objectives and produce tangible results and a competitive advantage.

Charles Davis - "The Earth Comfort Company" provides the infrastructure to install geothermal ground heat exchangers for ground source heat pump installations - a well-defined technology that is recognized as a way to reduce energy consumption in buildings in an environmentally friendly way.

Angela Lindsay - "Ready4Learning Club," a method of teaching young students to achieve peak performance learning every day by appropriately using psychologically researched emotional resilience tools. Students experience these tools through an age-appropriate music- and poetry-based activity program.

Daron Joffe - "Farmer D Organics" is designed to empower people to grow their own food by providing products, services and Web-based resources to make organic gardening fun and easy.

Ken Tennenbaum - "The Senior Resource Connection" will enhance the quality of life of senior citizens by enabling them to remain in their own homes for as long as possible through a unique approach: a comprehensive evaluation of their needs, a choice of selected referrals for the needed services and ongoing monitoring and oversight.

Marvin Heery - "CityComber LLC," high-quality, location-aware digital media content for tourists that visitors can access through CityComber- , customer- or provider-owned GPS devices, with expansion to other GPS-enabled mobile devices, such as the I-Phone and Blackberry, as technology develops.

Angels among us

Business "angels" are high-net-worth individual investors who seek high returns through private investments in start-up companies. Private investors generally are a diverse and dispersed population who made their wealth through a variety of sources.

But the typical business angels are often former entrepreneurs or executives who cashed out and retired early from ventures that they started and grew into successful businesses.

These self-made investors share many common characteristics:

They seek companies with high growth potential, strong management teams and solid business plans to aid the angels in assessing the company's value.

They typically invest in ventures involved in industries or technologies with which they are personally familiar.

They often co-invest with trusted friends and business associates. In these situations, there is usually one influential lead investor ("archangel") whose judgment is trusted by the rest of the group of angels.

Because of their business experience, many angels invest more than their money. They also seek active involvement in the business, such as consulting and mentoring the entrepreneur. They often take bigger risks or accept lower rewards when they are attracted to the non-financial characteristics of an entrepreneur's proposal.

Sometimes called "venture capital light," angel investors often provide a bridge from the self-funded stage of a business to the point where the business needs the higher level of funding that a venture capitalist would offer. Angel funding estimates typically range from \$150,000 to \$1.5 million.

Less is known about angel investing than venture capital because of the individuality and privacy of the investments, but the Small Business Administration estimates there are at least 250,000 angels active in the nation, funding about 30,000 small companies a year. The total investment from angels has been estimated at anywhere from \$20 billion to \$50 billion.

There are about 2 million people in the United States with the discretionary net worth to make angel investments.

Source: Small Business Administration

ABOUT ASAP

Ariel Savannah Angel Partners are accredited individual investors and corporate sponsors who actively participate in reviewing investment opportunities and work on member teams to conduct thorough due diligence on selected opportunities.

Among the group's objectives: to improve member investment portfolios and financial returns relative to what an individual could accomplish working alone; to promote regional economic development in Georgia, South Carolina and the Southeast region; and to provide a satisfying professional, personal and social experience.

Investors comprise a mix of retired, semi-retired and presently working members who share a track record of individual success.

Members are expected to contribute in different ways to suit their individual interests and time availabilities. Members can opt in or out of any deal depending on their personal interest and can invest at any level in pre-determined funding, usually in increments of \$5,000.



Daron Joffee of Farmer D Organics pitches his product to Bobby Teng, one of the judges at the FastPITCH Entrepreneurship Competition at the Westin Savannah Harbor. (John Carrington/Savannah Morning News) (Photo: [John Carrington](#))