

UT business plan competition develops entrepreneurs

Have you ever said, “I’ve got this really great idea for a business,” or “Sure wish I knew how to get this business idea off the ground?”

Three young entrepreneurs were contemplating these issues when they entered the University of Tennessee College of Business Administration’s First Annual Business Plan Competition for undergraduate students. They have since taken their ideas and turned them into reality. Each learned valuable lessons from the competition and from their first years in business.

Defining your business, developing well thought-out business plans, understanding your unique competitive advantages and implementing creative marketing programs are important tools for emerging entrepreneurs.

Here are their stories:

Stefan Wilson, founder and owner of SJW Tech Services



Wilson

“I had a passion for computers as far back as I can remember,” Wilson says. “I was repairing problems, installing software, and helping in the computer labs while

I was still in junior high. I always knew that I wanted to find a way to make a living working with computers... but how?”

Wilson said that while at UT he began formulating what he thought was his basic business model. But when he took a class on writing business plans he was shocked. “The professor kept asking me what business am I really in,” Wilson recalls. “He told me that I wasn’t in the computer repair business and to define what service I was providing ... then build

my plan.”

After questioning and really challenging his assumptions, Wilson concluded that he was, in fact, providing “up time and efficiency for his customers’ businesses.”

Armed with that recognition, he changed the focus of his business model.

“The plan I entered in the competition focused on an array of computer-related tech services I could provide small businesses... not just repair,” he explains. “SJW Tech Services would become the IT department for its customers.”

Perhaps the most valuable lesson Wilson learned during the process was that you must carefully define your business.

“Amazingly,” he says, “it’s not always obvious... but once you do, it answers many questions about how and where to allocate resources and look for opportunities.”

Eric Watkins, founding partner and president of Revolution Video Games



Watkins

Like Wilson, Watkins and his partners had a passion for their business.

“We all had worked in the retail video gaming industry and really enjoyed it. And, as with most enthusiastic young entrepreneurs, we were sure we knew how to ‘do it better,’” Watkins recalls.

Watkins had no formal training in writing a business plan, but discovered numerous sources of help.

“Of course, I would have valued a mentor to help guide me through some of the difficult questions that needed to be answered,” he says. “In fact, one of my main reasons for entering the competition was to get feedback from the experienced business people who were acting

business people who were acting as judges.”

One particular judge honed in on the company’s competitive environment ... a small start-up company competing against large, well-established retailers.

Watkins and his partners felt they had addressed the issue adequately, but the judge’s questions caused them to go back and refine their strategy to counter competitive threats.

“When the competition attacked with price, we already had implemented a customer service strategy,” Watkins says. “From the time we opened our doors, we were determined to know our customers on a first-name basis; to know their gaming interests; and to create an informal environment where gamers could come in, chat with us, and share their experiences. When the competition used price, we actually increased the inventory of products that our customers wanted. Our goal was to ensure that every customer left satisfied. We didn’t have to compete on price because no one

could beat our customer service.”

Watkins believes that the competition, with the tough questions from the judges, helped the partners prepare for real-world competitive challenges before they occurred. He was surprised about the bureaucratic challenges. “You just have to allow a lot of time and plow through the red tape.”

Andrew Bouldin, founder and CEO of MyCollegeRoadTrip.com



Bouldin

Identifying needs and then imagining a solution can be challenging; but that wasn’t the case for Andrew Bouldin.

“The first time I left the University of Tennessee heading to another school, the need was obvious... where do I stay, where do I eat, what can I do, all for a price a college student can afford? Who in the area provides good value and who doesn’t? Hoping you pick the right place or relying on plain dumb luck weren’t acceptable answers,” Bouldin says.

Familiar with social networking Web sites, Bouldin began to formulate an idea. Why couldn’t all these experiences of countless college students be collected and shared with others? The idea of MyCollegeRoadTrip.com was born. Preliminary market research at UT’s Knoxville campus suggested that Bouldin might be on to something, but he knew that scalability was critical to success, and he wanted to know if experienced entrepreneurs saw potential in his idea.

Bouldin’s entry into the competition took first place and inspired him to move forward with the business.

“Winning the Business Plan Competition confirmed that my idea was solid and something that definitely was worth making into a reality,” Bouldin says.

With a very small marketing budget, Bouldin’s major challenge was in promoting the site and getting input from thousands of college students about their trips. Using viral marketing tactics that included leveraging networks of friends,

Facebook, blogs, and forums where students spent their time, the site grew quickly to over 2,000 members in colleges across the country. MyCollegeRoadTrip.com’s on-campus marketing efforts included flyers, sidewalk chalk, classroom board posts and wristbands.

Bouldin envisions using feedback from current efforts to focus on a dozen campuses this fall.

“With the ability for the user to add content, the site can scale quickly to include travel information for destinations around the world,” he says. All the potential contributor need do is link to www.mycollegeroadtrip.com to provide input.”



Case Study is provided by the University of Tennessee’s College of Business Administration. For information about the annual Business Plan Competition, contact Tom Graves, director of operations, Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, at tgrave10@utk.edu or cei@utk.edu.