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## Entrepreneurs trade pitches at VT event

The Entrepreneurial Summit is a contest and a proving ground for new business concepts.

By Jeff Sturgeon | The Roanoke Times

BLACKSBURG — At a Thursday moneymaking workshop, Virginia Tech freshman Alan Kratz said he wants to create a venture capital firm run by engineering students with \$50,000 to risk in promising business ventures.

Kratz told the audience the engineering talent on board would set the company apart.

During the VT KnowledgeWorks Entrepreneurial Summit, participants took turns describing their businesses or business ideas in a bid for money, speaking experience and feedback. The event drew 135 people to the Inn at Virginia Tech.

Start or expand a business in this economy?

Mike Drzal, an attorney with the Blacksburg office of LeClairRyan, an event sponsor, said economic forces are punishing many old-line companies that failed to adapt, such as Circuit City, which went into bankruptcy and closed. Entrepreneurs prepared to bring their talents to the marketplace will gain the best insurance against layoff, he said, being self-employed.

“True security lies, in my view, in controlling your destiny,” Drzal said.

Stepping out front to participate in a student business concept competition, Leila Green spoke on behalf of Autonomy. It’s a concept for a custom tool set company created by Green and fellow industrial design students of Virginia Tech instructor Mitzi Vernon.

Autonomy would sell pre-assembled toolboxes through major retailers such as Target to budding do-it-yourselfers.

She appeared to complete her presentation without difficulty. Jim Flowers, who directs KnowledgeWorks, an arm of the Virginia Tech Foundation, asked Green if she and her partners want to launch the company. They said yes.

Earlier in the morning, Flowers took the audience through the stages of a successful business launch. First comes drive. Flowers prefers “moxie” — having the energy, courage and perseverance to see a venture through to success.

“Is the fire there?” Flowers asked.

If so, he gave this advice:

- Grab onto a growing market with all your might. An invention without a market, no matter how brilliant, is without commercial value. “Who cares?” Flowers asked.
- Exploit your unfair competitive advantage.

- Find mentors. “You just can’t know it all,” Flowers said. A book can be a mentor, he added.

Finally, Flowers advised writing and practicing a good elevator speech. He invited audience members to stand and present theirs.

Fred Cook, a graduate student in engineering mechanics at Virginia Tech, took about a minute to explain his idea for what he called a relationship-building company to serve gregarious athletes.

Cook’s company would furnish plastic identification cards that are easy to carry and don’t break down under exposure to sweat. He said he is lining up a supplier. Never miss a relationship opportunity again, he said.

Later in the day, representatives of various ready-to-fund companies addressed investor representatives in a lively pitchmaking session called CVG LiveFire! The session, a signature event of the Charlottesville Venture Group, offered a chance for business people to make a quick, clear pitch to people looking to invest.

“You get one swing of the bat,” Drzal said. “If you whiff on it — ooh — it really hurts you.”

Jeff Sims, a sales and marketing executive with Progress Printing in Lynchburg, introduced his company, Gladhandle. It’s a Web-based provider of branded marketing materials such as business cards and corporate greeting cards for small businesses.

David Rose, who runs New York’s largest angel investor network, was impressed.

“That was in the top 5 percent of presentations I have seen,” Rose said, and went on to tell the speaker that he omitted a clear description of his business model.

Then Tonya Mallory, president and CEO of Health Diagnostic Laboratory, a tenant in Richmond’s biotechnology park, asked for \$1.5 million. She wants to add individualized laboratory services for people with heart disease, diabetes and a liver condition.

Valerie Gaydos, who runs a consortium of angel groups in Philadelphia, said she was confused.

“My gut instinct is, you have something here. I’m just not sure — you have a lot of inconsistencies,” Gaydos said.

Mallory replied to every criticism until her time ran out.

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