

2009 John Ruffatto Business Plan Competition

The School of Business Administration at the University of Montana – Missoula hosted the 20th Annual John Ruffatto Business Plan Competition on May 14, 2009 and over 250 business professionals, community leaders, students and faculty were on hand to watch teams compete for more than \$25,000 in prizes. This event showcases the entrepreneurial aspirations of students across the state. Over the nineteen year history of the event more than fifty businesses have been started by the competitors who participated in this event. At least seven businesses from the last three years alone have been launched by competitors. One of these businesses, Rocky Mountain Truss Company, posted first year sales in excess of \$1.5 million.

For this year's competition faculty from Montana-based higher education institutions identified twenty-five teams with viable business ventures and had their students submit business plans for the competition. A distinguished group of five judges met on May 2, 2009 and selected fifteen teams that were invited to compete in the Semifinal Round in Missoula. Ten of the teams were assigned to the High Growth Potential Division while the remaining five teams competed in the Lifestyle Business Division.

The prestigious panel of twenty-nine judges consisted of venture capitalists, angel investors, bankers, successful entrepreneurs, corporate executives, and represented a wide spectrum of professional expertise. The judging panel included former senior corporate executives from companies such as ALLTEL, Anderson Zurmuehlen, Bausch & Lomb, D.A. Davidson, Dial Corporation, Farmer's State Bank, Merck, Microsoft, Nortel, Overstock.com, Starbucks, and 3Com as well as founders of organizations such as Adventure Life, Big Sky Brewing, Benchmark Simulations, City Brew Coffee, Freedom Bank, Frontier Angel Fund, Glacier Venture Fund, Bank of Montana, Huse Law, Pyron Technologies, Rocky Mountain Venture Capital, Surgical Principals, Inc., Treasure State Bank, and Verisoft, Western CPE.



Pictured: Judges Don Gaumer, Dave Andrews, Diane Smith, Nicole Hagerman

The competition kicked off with an Elevator Pitch competition. Each team was allowed only one slide and three minutes to explain the key points of their business plans and sell the idea to the judges. The event was won by a team of graduates from the University of Montana, *Openlink*, presented by Schuyler Mann (Shown below left with teammate Sarah Fitzgerald).



In the High Growth Divisions, *Openlink* and *Ninja Software* won their respective divisions in the early morning round and automatically advanced to the Finalist Round. *Openlink* Mobile builds and sells digital mobile marketing solutions to small, locally-focused businesses. Ninja Software is a technology firm specializing in innovative resource management software solutions.



Pictured: Kevin O'Reilly, Daniel Lande, Blake McWilliams, Jacob Marchi; Ninja Software

Meanwhile Edens Systems, *Boomers*, *Montana Subcontractors* and *I Heart Shoes* placed 2nd and 3rd respectively in each of their respective High Growth Divisions and were provided one more opportunity to pitch their business plans to the judges in the Wildcard Round. *Edens Systems* is a hydroponic growth venture that will generate revenue by selling locally grown produce to restaurant distributors. *Boomers* health club provides a comfortable, specialized, and laid back way for people from the baby boomers generation to obtain an enjoyable and effective workout compared to the current health club options. *Montana Subcontractors* plans a web-based service company that will connect contractors in the state of Montana with the specialists they need to complete their projects. *I Heart Shoes* is a premiere "design your own footwear" website for savvy shoppers who cannot find exactly what they are looking for in stores, offering the customer a choice of material, platform, color, specialized sizing, and additional customization. Each of these teams were competing for the third and final spot in the High Growth Division's Final Round. *Edens Systems* emerged as the winner of the Wildcard Round and advanced to the Finals.



Pictured: R. Scott Gray, Edens Systems

In the Lifestyle Division *Simple Space Solutions* was declared the winner during the morning presentations and *Ever After Elegance* placed second. *Simple Space Solutions*, a business plan for a retail and consulting company specializing in home organizing and home staging in Helena, Montana, also advanced to the evening presentation round for the finalist teams.

After thirteen hours of competing, the event concluded with an awards presentation. Competition Director Dr. Jeff Shay remarked, "It's a long day for the students, the judges, and the army of staff and student workers that we have involved with the competition. But it is all worth it to see the learning opportunities

that have been provided today. It's a very special competition given the nature of Montana's entrepreneurial economy. I know we will see several of these students as business leaders down the road. We really appreciate how the community comes together for this event. There are similar competitions across the country that don't receive nearly the sponsorship and judging support that we do."

Lifestyle Division:

1st Place - \$3,000

Business Name: Simple Space Solutions

Team: Tina Engel, Jennifer Hess, Kayluh Menager, Virginia Tynan

2nd Place - \$1,000

Business Name: Ever After Elegance

Team: Kristen Mansch

High Growth Division

1st Place - \$5,000

Business Name: Openlink

Team: Schuyler Mann and Sarah Fitzgerald

2nd Place - \$3,000

Business Name: Ninja software

Team: Daniel Lande, Jacob Marchi, Blake McWilliams, Kevin O'Reilly

3rd Place - \$1,000

Business Name: Eden Systems

Team: R. Scott Gray

Pictured: Haley Clark, Hannah Reno and Larry Gianchetta

People's Choice Award - \$1,000

Business Name: Eden Systems

Brandon Speth Award - \$1,000

Stephanie Potter

Top 3 Undergraduate Awards

1st Place - \$500

Business Name: Simple Space Solutions

Team: Tina Engel, Jennifer Hess, Kayluh Menager, Virginia Tynan

2nd Place - \$400

Business Name: Montana Subcontractor Database

Team: Ryan Martin, Jeffrey Quickel, Necia Wayland-Smith

3rd Place - \$300

Business Name: Aloha Fitness & Health

Team: Stephanie Potter