UM Student Wins Business Startup Challenge, Winners Announced
May 09, 2016

UM student Zachary Falen won first place in the John Ruffatto Business Startup Challenge.

MISSOULA – The University of Montana School of Business Administration, along with the Montana Academy of Distinguished Entrepreneurs and the Blackstone LaunchPad at UM, have announced the winners of the 27th annual John Ruffatto Business Startup Challenge. Zachary Falen of Missoula, a UM management information systems undergraduate student, took home the top prize of $15,000 for his startup plan, Bloom Content. Bloom Content is a cloud-hosted web platform that connects undergraduate content-producers with local businesses looking to stand out online. Bloom gives local businesses a convenient, affordable option for generating custom video, photo and graphic content.

During the 13-hour statewide competition, held May 5 at UM’s Harold and Priscilla Gilkey Building and Gallagher Business Building, 16 student teams competed in three rounds of judging and presentations, leading up to the evening’s final round, when four finalists presented their business plans to a panel of 55 judges and an audience of more than 200.

The event is judged and coached by venture capitalists, angel investors, bankers, successful entrepreneurs and corporate executives who share their expertise and commit their time before and during the competition.

“Montana has a special ecosystem that allows us to link students to statewide and national mentors, angel investors and venture capitalists in a personal way that other states just cannot do,” said Paul Gladen, director of UM Blackstone LaunchPad and CEO of the Montana Academy of Distinguished Entrepreneurs, the organization that runs the competition.

Support from more than 50 sponsors and private donors funded the more than $50,000 prize purse and the students’ competition expenses. Details on the awards and winners follow.

- First place: Bloom Content – Falen, $15,000 prize.
- Second place: Second Nature – Montana State University graphic design student Shae Stein and MSU mechanical engineering student Seth Carlstrom. The Second Nature shower chair helps improve the bathing experience of dementia patients and their caregivers through a unique set of product features aimed at alleviating the stress felt by both parties. $7,500 prize.
- Third place: Chilton Skis – UM forestry school graduate student George Gaines and UM accounting student Marguerite Thordarson. Chilton Skis is a Missoula-based manufacturer creating an all-mountain ski from salvaged and sustainably harvested wood, combined with modern composite materials. $5,000 prize.
- Fourth place: Birds of Feather – UM marketing and management student Matthew Gillespie, UM marketing student Alexis Schreder and UM finance student Colton Carter. Birds of a Feather Co. sources down feathers from legally hunted migratory birds across the U.S. Its mission is to provide a sustainable product through ethical sourcing methods to help companies create the top-quality gear consumers use every day. $2,500 prize.
• Elevator Pitch (60-second team presentation): Danceador and Chilton Skis – UM dance student Johanna Ciampa delivered a pitch for Danceador, a virtual dance ambassador that will bring world dance to one platform. It will be a simple, intuitive resource that contains comprehensive global dance content, which can easily be accessed and filtered with summaries from dance ethnographers. Gaines and Thordarson of Chilton Skis tied Danceador for first. Each team will receive a $1,750 prize.

A number of special awards were given to teams or individuals based on specific criteria. This is the inaugural year of the Athena Award given to a team featuring outstanding contributions from female students. The award winners follow:

• Brandon Speth Passion, Poise, and Charisma Award: Falen. $1,000 prize.

• People’s Choice Award: Second Nature, Stein. $2,500 prize.

• Polymath Award: Danceador, Ciampa. $2,500 prize.

• Most Dynamic and Scalable Award: Polo: The Social Calendar, MSU student Waylon Roberts. Polo: The Social Calendar is an app that allows you to effortlessly find out when you and your friends are free at the same time. The large-scale platform allows friends to communicate and coordinate social events. $1,000 prize.

• Blackstone Launchpad Innovation Award: Second Nature, Stein and Carlstrom. $1,000 prize.

• Manufactured Product Award: Chilton Skis, Gaines and Thordarson. $1,000 prize.

• Feasibility Award: Tip Top Nail Bar, UM management student Gabrielle Gebauer and marketing student Michela Millette. Tip Top Nail Bar is a local nail salon that provides nontoxic and natural manicure and pedicure services in a fume-free, relaxing and hip environment. $1,000 prize.

• Athena Award: Bakaate, MSU-Billings business management students Bessie Crooked Arm, Sabrena Half and Violet Birdinground. Bakaate is a publishing company that aims to inspire and empower children to take care of mother Earth and respect all Native cultures through books and dolls.

This competition further supports Montana’s reputation as the “Economic Frontier.” Montana ranks No. 1 in startup activity by the Kauffman Foundation; both state universities host Blackstone LaunchPad, startup incubators funded by the Blackstone Charitable Foundation; and a new Montana venture fund, Next Frontier Capital, aims to raise $20 Million in investments for high-tech businesses in Montana.

MADE was founded by successful entrepreneurs with the goal of bringing their experience to students and the classroom. In addition to supporting the John Ruffatto Startup Challenge, held each spring at UM, MADE organizes an advanced entrepreneurship seminar series and honors influential entrepreneurs who demonstrate a commitment to Montana with the Pioneer in Industry Award. For more information about MADE, visit http://www.business.umt.edu/organizations/MADE.aspx.

UM’s School of Business Administration is accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International, the most rigorous accrediting body for business degree programs. For more information visit http://www.business.umt.edu/.

For more information call Gladen at 406-396-3534 or email paul.gladen@mso.umt.edu.