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Filling the Pipeline: Entrepreneurs discuss fellowships

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Kansas City Business Journal - by [David Twiddy](#) Staff Writer

In its third year, the Kansas Pipeline Entrepreneurial Fellowship Program continued its mission to provide some of the state's most promising startups with the right foundation for further growth.

Executives from eight Kansas businesses were chosen from hundreds of applications and put through a series of quarterly three-day education sessions on subjects ranging from ways to organize their finances to how to improve how they communicate their business to customers and potential investors.

The class members also got access to high-level business mentors and venture capitalists.

Developed initially by **Kansas Technology Enterprise Corp.**, the Pipeline program last year cut itself loose as a 501(c)3 organization in a bid to draw money from other sources. It still receives about \$500,000 a year from the state.

The 2009 class included the following metro-area entrepreneurs: Jerry Calovich, co-founder of Lenexa-based **Emerge Medical Solutions** LLC; Cason Coplin, president of Lenexa-based EcoFit Lighting; Davyeon Ross, CEO of Lenexa-based **AthletixNation Inc.**; Chris Routh, CEO of Overland Park-based Freshly Branded; Maria Stecklein, vice president of **Orbis Biosciences Inc.**, based in Kansas City, Kan.; and Jason Tatge, CEO of Lenexa-based **Farms Technology** LLC.

With their yearlong terms in the program finished, three members of the class share what they learned, saying they most valued being able to see their businesses from a fresh perspective and meeting people who could one day help their businesses. They also already have put the program's lessons to use to improve their businesses.

MEDIA



Maria Stecklein, Vice president of Orbis Biosciences Inc.

Maria Stecklein said the program taught her a lot about market analysis, helping raise the percentages when moving into a new market area.

Stecklein oversees business development for 18-month-old Orbis Biosciences Inc., which is developing microparticle technology that controls the release of active ingredients. Although Orbis has used the technology in several industries, it is focusing on pharmaceutical drugs.

She said she previously would choose new possible markets based on “a few pieces of data and a good gut feeling.” But after going through the program, she is relying more on a wider range of customer feedback and other measurements for the six-employee company.

“I think we have a better strategy of where to go in the market,” she said.

Stecklein also said she valued the combination of experts brought in by the program and her fellow class members, who could discuss her company’s issues and come up with possible solutions.

“(Orbis) is not a big company, where you have all these departments and can get their input,” she said. “I think it’s the support system that was the most helpful.”

Although Orbis is not pursuing venture capital at the moment, she said she appreciated the ability to hone her message for investors and meet people who have commercialized similar products.

“The financing (information) didn’t play as much of a role yet, but down the road it might,” she said.

Davyeon Ross, CEO of AthletixNation Inc.

For Davyeon Ross, the program became a wake-up call on how he was collecting revenue.

AthletixNation Inc. markets college sports videos for media and sports Internet sites, collecting revenue through the sale of advertising shown along with the clips.

Ross said he knew the company showed an average of 30,000 ads a day, which he thought was decent. One of the Pipeline program’s education modules focused on developing ways to more objectively measure and analyze the company’s performance. He immediately applied those tools to his ad counters, forcing him to look at his numbers in a new way.

After looking at the number of sports clips being shown and the number of ads triggered, he realized that the company should have been around 80,000 ads a day.

“That’s a 50,000-ad swing that represents bottom-line cash,” Ross said. “It’s critical for us, especially as a small company. We didn’t need to be leaving any money on the table.”

Besides a better understanding of how to monitor and tweak his business, Ross said the program helped him with his communication skills and provided access to experts and venture capitalists he may never have met or been able to talk to as a tech startup in Kansas City.

“The connections you get from the Pipeline are going to help you foster relationships for this current business and future businesses to come,” he said.

Ross wouldn’t disclose revenue, but he said the company is doing better, doubling the number of collegiate conferences licensing their content to six, including the [Big 12](#), and having discussions with larger advertisers, which allows Ross to expand the company’s geographic reach. It also hopes to continue spreading its name through its Bracket Challenge, a video clip service built around the

spring's [NCAA](#) Basketball Tournament.

"It's still startup scary, but that fear breeds innovation and keeps us motivated and working hard, so I think it's healthy," he said.

Jason Tatge, CEO of Farms Technology LLC

Jason Tatge, who won the Innovator of the Year award, said he came into the Pipeline program with an economics degree, an MBA and an education about startups won painfully through the dot-com bubble.

But Tatge, CEO of Lenexa-based Farms Technology LLC, said he still learned a great deal from the program. If anything, the dedicated entrepreneur — "I don't think I've taken 12 days off in the last three years" — found the value of raising his head out of the trenches from time to time to see his business and its possibilities in a new light.

"For three days, you just dive in and go over everybody's business," he said. "You get away from your business, and you look at these certain issues. It takes you out of your comfort zone."

For Tatge, the program got him to rethink the business model for Farms Technology.

Previously, the company, which offers a trading platform for agricultural commodities, primarily made money on a per-transaction basis.

That meant the company was flush when the market was doing well but had very little coming in during downturns, he said.

The program spurred Tatge to experiment with annual subscription fees. Farms Technology, he said, had its best year ever last year.

"We made our revenue stream more predictable, and when we have months with big transactions, that's upside," he said, declining to provide revenue figures. "It was the difference between being in the red and black last year."

Tatge said he also valued the network of experts from the program he now can call on for advice, in Kansas City and abroad.

NEXT IN THE PIPELINE

Here are the entrepreneurs who have been selected to participate in the 2010 Kansas Pipeline Entrepreneurial Fellowship Program, announced Jan. 21:

- Tahir Ahmad, CEO of Wichita-based [PetroPower](#)
- David Barnes, president of Overland Park-based Sweet Spot Marketing
- Bob Collister, CEO of Lenexa-based [MemoryShowcase.com](#)
- Bryan DiGiorgio, CEO of Overland Park-based [Workspace Communications](#)
- Nate Gregory, CEO of Wichita-based MoJack Distributors
- Stuart Jackson, CEO of Overland Park-based [AnalyzeDirect Inc.](#)
- Jeremy Jones, CEO of Wichita-based [Nitride Solutions](#)
- Jay Kim, CEO of Lenexa-based [Data Locker Inc.](#)
- Jeff Southard, vice president of drug development for Lenexa-based [VasoGenix Pharmaceuticals Inc.](#)
- Ben Tyson, CEO of Wichita-based [Time Trails](#)

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