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Geeks' Meet Market Has Share of Success Stories

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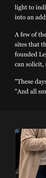
By Kim Hart

Social Matchbox has a new vibe these days.

The networking event was first known as "speed dating for geeks" because start-ups could give three-minute pitches about their idea in hopes of finding business partners, landing customers or even securing a bit of funding.

Now many of those geeks are running full-fledged businesses, even if they aren't yet profitable. Some, like GeniusRocket , a Bethesda-based "crowdsourcing" marketing firm, and DubMeNow , a McLean-based start-up hoping to help people exchange digital business cards via smartphones, have become familiar names in the local technology scene. The entrepreneurs behind those companies now help make connections and recommendations for other, younger start-ups at the meet-ups.

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"I'd say the event is now more like 'state of the start-ups,' " said Juliana Nwihauser , who hosts the event with her husband, Robert . The couple runs technology recruiting firm Staffmagnet in Dupont Circle.

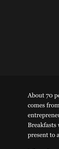
Thirteen start-ups -- more were scheduled but a few didn't show up -- gave quick spiels about their businesses last Thursday evening. Some even said they were hiring.

One is Mingle 360 , a company that has created a device allowing people to exchange electronic business cards. Mingle 360 provided free "mingle sticks" to attendees, who wore them around their necks. To exchange contact information with a new acquaintance, they pointed the sticks, which resembled large thumb drives, toward each other and clicked a small button. Both sticks glow with a small green light to indicate information has been shared and can be downloaded into an address book.

A few of the other firms in attendance have recently launched Web sites that they hope will thrive in a down economy. Ben Hattan co-founded LegalRiver.com , a site where small and mid-size businesses can solicit, review and compare lawyers and legal services.

"These days lawyers are willing to do anything" to find clients, he said. "And all small businesses have trouble finding lawyers."

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Kit Cody , who until recently ran online operations at AARP , founded Trustys.com , a local directory where people can find services such as plumbers or landscapers based on reputation, price and location. Natalie Hopkins started SaunaDry.com , which lets patients make appointments over the weekend or the same day they need treatment. "I think the health-care industry is very eager to use us at a time like this," she said.

Greg Bardwell , founder of Innovative Query , a software technology that sorts divergenzied data, sees his company finding business in the public sector rather than with consumers.

"All roads seem to lead to the government," he said. "The government's got a huge data problem."

Some were looking for potential employers. Carl Leonard works as a contractor at the National Institutes of Health and builds robots as a hobby. If enough funding becomes available, he'll be able to expand his job at NIH.

"If not, I'll be looking for another job," he said, perhaps with some of the companies in the room.

Grubstake Needs Home

Grubstake Breakfast , one of the area's longest-running and most popular events for entrepreneurs, may be in limbo.

The organization that puts it together, the Business Alliance of George Mason University , is ending its 20-year exclusive relationship with George Mason . Because of severe budget shortfalls in Virginia, the university has been forced to cut funding for the organization, which is now looking to partner with other colleges in the region, including the University of Maryland , Johns Hopkins University , Virginia Tech and James Madison University .

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About 70 percent of the Business Alliance's $410,000 annual budget comes from sponsors, members and registration fees for its events and entrepreneur bootcamps. For many years, the quarterly Grubstake Breakfasts were the only venue in the area for young companies to present to a room full of potential investors and business partners.

When George Mason began to support the Business Alliance, its focus was on Northern Virginia's entrepreneurial community. But sponsors and volunteer advisers are increasingly coming from Maryland and the District, said executive director Judy Costello. About a third of the attendees at last month's breakfast came from outside of Virginia, she said.

Costello said it is unclear if George Mason will continue to financially support the organization, but she sees expanding to other universities as an opportunity to spread resources, such as internships and job opportunities with member companies, to more students in the region.

Kim Hart writes about the Washington technology scene every Monday. Contact her at http://hartk@washpost.com

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