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Business innovators covet Indiana 'Idol' recognition

Competitions offer prizes, exposure for products

By Tom Spalding

tom.spalding@indystar.com
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A robot that mows golf-course putting greens. Mood-enhancing lip gloss. Software that monitors Internet "chitchat" to tell companies what's being said about them.

These aren't just concepts -- they're little-known inventions by Indiana companies and Hoosier innovators showcased at the Indiana Venture Idol and Collegiate Idol competitions Thursday.

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"It's great to see other innovations and what other smart people are doing," said Stuart Nightenhelser, director of advanced programs for Indianapolis-based Wolf Technical Services. His company's creation? A non-motorized "smart" energy-absorbing restraint system that allows a military helicopter crew to move freely around the cabin while staying safely tethered.

The day's real winner is the state's economy, organizers say, because small companies and independent entrepreneurs are just as crucial to the state's future as the big companies that are also patent powerhouses, such as Eli Lilly and Co., Delphi Technologies and Cummins. The event is part of Indiana Entrepreneurship Week, which links aspiring entrepreneurs with educators, investors and mentors in an effort to turn local ideas into fuel for regional economic growth.

For the companies involved, the participants' creations are the real deal.

"This is real business . . . with real money on the line," said Bruce Kidd, director of small business and entrepreneurship for the Indiana Economic Development Corp.

Precise Path Robotics' 14 employees in Carmel are working on a robot that can trim grass on golf course putting greens.

Four-employee Indianapolis company Vyante is developing ChatterSpike, which aims to help corporations find out what's being said about them on the Web.

Express Effects is even smaller. The cosmetics-focused startup founded by Indiana University Kelley School of Business student Adam Manwarren and business partner April Morris presented a product called THINGloss -- a high-quality lip gloss for women that contains appetite-suppressing ingredients such as peppermint and cinnamon. With a marketing plan in place and a Web site in production, Express Effects took home the Collegiate Idol second-place award, a prize they hope will generate attention and legitimacy.

The Venture Club of Indiana, Techpoint and IEDC were co-sponsors of the competitions. Five judges peppered representatives of each company with questions about the practicality and commercial appeal of each invention. About 200 people in the audience at the Indiana Convention Center then cast electronic votes from their seats.

Terry Pahis, president and chief operating officer for Anderson-based iPower Energy Systems, entered a prototype of a uniquely configured power generator he wants to sell.

"A successful product is a product where customer need and a good idea crisscross," Pahis said. "When you go into somebody's business and say, 'Hey, do I got a deal for you,' you don't have long to capture people's attention."

Thursday's event was a continuing effort to create an encouraging climate for inventors in Indiana. It came a day after Gov. Mitch Daniels announced that the state will create the Dr. Philip E. Nelson Innovation Prize to recognize Hoosier scientists for their discoveries, research and inventions. Nelson is a Purdue University scientist who was awarded the 2007 World Food Prize in October for his revolutionary achievements in the field of food processing.



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