

Babson competition winners sell viral videos, healthful foods

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Babson College started the first ever business plan competition for undergraduates in 1984. That helped it achieve its status as a top United States college for aspiring entrepreneurs, especially at the undergraduate level.

Babson's 2010 competition concluded on Thursday, with the best undergraduate award and \$5,000 cash prize going to Crelligence Media, a digital video venture founded by a Babson senior, Alexander Debelov, from Rostov-On-Don, Russia.

Crelligence gives incentives to independent digital filmmakers to create online videos — about specific products or brands — that have the potential to go viral. Ad agencies and marketing teams pay Crelligence a per-campaign fee to “crowdsource” — or send out assignments to video makers — and then to syndicate the clips online.

To test the concept, Crelligence started a “filmmaker community” Web site, ViralSkool.com, offering \$3,000 in cash prizes for videos to spread the word about the site. An impressive 2,000 filmmakers participated.

Producers who met the assignment criteria, and whose clips went viral, won a piece of the \$3,000 “budget,” explained Mr. Debelov. Those garnering the most views got the most money. More than 600,000 people watched the videos online, he said. And some videos were chosen to air on broadcast television shows on CBS in the United States and Fuji TV in Japan, adding two million more views.

The buzz factor helped Mr. Debelov, the 22-year-old chief executive, sign a \$20,000 deal with his first customer, a spray-paint maker called Bosny that is based in Bangkok and expanding its sales in North America.

Crelligence uses a proprietary application to automatically post select clips to blogs, social media sites and groups where online audiences share and comment on them, including YouTube, Metacafe, StumbleUpon and Digg.

“The application makes the process quicker than it would be to upload and share videos manually,” said Mr. Debelov. “It takes less than two hours to get them out to at least 100 sites.” He and his partners have invested \$20,000 out of pocket into their start-up, spending it partly to hire lawyers to ensure their technology and plan comply with copyright and other laws.

A judge at Babson's competition, Abigail Hechtman, who is a Boston area lawyer specializing in corporate transactions, said Crelligence was the clear winner in the undergraduate division because its concept was both market ready and cutting edge. “Inventions like DVRs, and on-demand TV mean you don't sit through a traditional ad anymore,” she said. “You fast-forward right through it. If your friend made the ad, or shared it with you online, though, you will watch.”

Babson's best graduate business plan award — \$20,000 in cash and \$20,000 worth of business services — went to a more traditional company, Evolve Foods, which offers gluten- and allergen-free packaged foods for consumers who have allergies or other dietary concerns.

Sara Gragnolati, Evolve's chief executive and founder, plans to use her winnings to make market-ready samples of her first product, a ready-to-eat hot cereal made from ancient grains, including quinoa, and packaged in microwavable, single-serving pouches. She brought samples for judges to taste.

Ms. Gragnolati was inspired to start the company by her own gluten allergy diagnosis a few years ago. "I worked in the natural and organics foods industry for 10 years by the time I was diagnosed," she said. "So I was a very educated consumer. But I was so frustrated. Every time I went shopping, there was nothing nutritious, tasty and gluten-free that wouldn't take a lot of time for me to prepare. After griping to my friends that someone needs to do this, I just decided to do it myself."

A Babson competition judge, Jo Tango, who founded and is a partner with the venture fund Kepha Partners, said he was impressed by Ms. Gragnolati's passion and presentation. "The entrepreneur hit both the left brain and the right brain criteria for me," said Mr. Tango. "She knows this space and had worked with Procter & Gamble. But her passion came through. She isn't just looking for a paycheck."

A third award of \$5,000 cash went to the best student-run business of the year, Emergent Energy Group (also known as Emergent Group) founded by a Babson senior, Chris Jacobs. The chief executive joked that he was glad to "get an 'A' in entrepreneurship," because his G.P.A. this year was not above a 3.0, though he will be graduating in a few weeks.

Emergent is an alternative energy consulting firm that develops solar and wind projects in New Jersey, Massachusetts and other regions where state and local governments give them tax breaks or credits as incentives. Mr. Jacobs was a 2009 finalist in the Global Student Entrepreneur Awards held by Entrepreneurs' Organization.

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