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Big state firms explore potential pairings by 'speed dating' tech start-ups

4/8/2014

WAUKESHA -- Shobhan Thakkar and Kari Douglas of Tascet Inc., a 9-year-old Madison-based tech firm that invented software to protect clients from identity fraud, nabbed Randall Lambrecht, an executive with Aurora Health Care for just 15 minutes on Monday.

It was enough time for them to explain their products and services to a representative of the Wisconsin health care giant that is actively seeking innovative solutions to help patients and save costs.

Lambrecht was among representatives of 16 major Wisconsin companies who agreed to participate Monday in a "speed dating" event where they could hear pitches from entrepreneurs eager to sell their products or solicit angel funds.

About 54 start-up firms signed up to give their 15-minute pitches at the Wisconsin Tech Summit at the GE Healthcare Institute in Waukesha. The daylong event also included workshops and speakers, including David Krakauer of the Wisconsin Institute for Discovery; and Mike Lovell, former UW-Milwaukee chancellor and incoming Marquette University president.

"The idea for the 'speed dating' event is that major companies and emerging companies don't always travel in the same orbit," said Tom Still of the Wisconsin Technology Council, which sponsored the event.

For Thakkar and Douglas, who had lined up several 15-minute meetings with major companies, the event was the perfect platform to get the attention of potential clients and make contacts with whom they could follow up later.

"We're meeting people we want to meet," said Douglas. "You're not going to close on a day like today, but it's a nice way to make introductions. It's a nice way to be around other people who are trying to bring new technologies to the forefront. The companies that they've assembled here today are obviously looking for innovative solutions."

Lambrecht and other company executives held a panel discussion in which they told entrepreneurs in attendance that information and electronic data analysis has become key to modern business.

Also on the panel were Kyle Nakatsuji of American Family Insurance, Sujeet

Chand of Rockwell Automation, Munesh Makhija of GE Healthcare, Rich Johnson of Hewlett Packard and Jay Bayne of the Milwaukee Institute, a nonprofit organization that supports scientific, engineering and technology entrepreneurship in the Great Lakes area.

Bayne praised the "speed dating" concept as an opportunity for start-ups to learn how find a market for their innovative ideas.

"One of the things we have done in this state for the last decade is to incent this notion of entrepreneurship, so we have a significant number of very young entrepreneurs," he said. "The problem with young entrepreneurs is their world view is relatively narrow and their failure rate is very, very high. There's an opportunity here to have young entrepreneurs with really good ideas get some feedback from mature organizations that have experience in actually bringing things to market."

Bayne noted that just because it's generally assumed that companies are increasingly dependent on technological innovations, "it may not get you new sales."

Johnson of Hewlett Packard agreed. He said his company is constantly on the lookout for ideas "with outcome-based results." At the same time, he cautioned entrepreneurs that there would be "no promises" -- only that his company would listen to sales pitches for "things that we know we can do better."

"My goal here is just to listen to folks to see if there is anything out there that could be taken to the next level, that next step," said Johnson. "Maybe some things are fantastic, but just won't work for HP in Wisconsin, but maybe (would work for) HP in another state or another business line."

"At Aurora, we really want to hear those new ideas," said Lambrecht. "In many ways, Aurora's still an emerging company when it comes to innovation and research. So when someone approaches us and they have a really great idea, if we think it has real patient benefit or reduces costs, we're all ears."

Tony Wise and David Gee were excited to find potential clients and investors for their 3-year-old start-up, Bungee Loyalty Programs -- so named for its potential "to keep customers coming back."

The firm designed and "coded from scratch" a software program that companies can install to register customers into loyalty or "rewards" programs. It also offers monthly data analysis for clients.

The pair say Bungee's software can be adapted to diverse industries and can also be used for internal incentive programs, such as tracking sales goals or employee preventive health programs. Their product saves companies the far

greater expense of paying for a custom-designed program, they say.

Wise conceded that like many tech-savvy entrepreneurs, he isn't a natural salesperson, so he appreciated the brief, "speed-dating" format as a chance to play up the high-tech features of his company's product.

"Speaking as an IT guy, that's difficult," said Wise. "A lot of times, the people I'm dealing with, if I'm in a sales role, they're not going to understand the technology, they're not going to want to understand the technology, they just want to know the benefits, whereas the passion that I have is about the technology.

"From a technologist's standpoint, being able to highlight the components that make our application and our business unique and communicate where those can have an impact across an organization. rather than just meeting one immediate and narrow need, is really exciting and a tremendous opportunity."

Gee, the marketing professional in the team, said he was at the "speed dating" event as much to seek investors as new clients.

Historically, Wisconsin investors are more accustomed to putting their money in tangible products, he said.

"It's hard to find angel investors, especially in technology," said Gee. "Firms on the West Coast will come to the table much quicker with much more money, but we really wanted to stay in the Midwest."

Some major companies in attendance have money to invest.

GE Healthcare is interested in not only finding new products, but also finding promising companies in which to invest, Makhija told the group.

"One of the things I'll be listening for," he said, "are ways to simplify our business."

But he added that overall, "We're learning from start-ups. We're learning their language. At our annual leadership meeting kickoff, we had several 30-year-olds sitting on the stage along with GE executives and board members, talking to us about the work of start-ups."

-- *By Kay Nolan*
For WisBusiness.com