

Business Sense: In Praise of Economic Fuel

Michael Kraft/For the Times-Standard
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This past week was a hectic one for the competitors in the Economic Fuel Student Business Challenge.

On Monday, their business plans were due, reportedly causing a rush at FedEx/Kinko's in time to meet the 5 p.m. deadline. Thirty-two teams submitted plans. On Tuesday, about half of those teams took advantage of the opportunity to practice their 2-minute "elevator pitches." When Thursday came, it was time for the big show in which all of the teams presented their business ideas to an audience up at Humboldt State.

For those who don't know, Economic Fuel is a local business plan competition. Students and recent graduates of Humboldt State University and College of the Redwoods work in teams on a business idea and write a full-blown business plan. At stake are prizes worth a total of \$117,000, with four grand prizes worth \$25,000 each, intended to help fund the business.

At the Small Business Development Center, we have several roles with respect to the competition. We provide a few of the workshops. We work one on one with those competitors who want our guidance in how you write a business plan. Least known, but probably most important, is that we continue to work with some of the competitors as they bring their business ideas into reality.

I like to think our organization is special, but I have to say that we are far from alone in supporting the competitors. Lawyers, accountants and lenders give their time free of charge to provide advice. Judges, busy business people themselves, put in many hours reading business plans and listening to dozens of short presentations and a number of longer ones. CR and HSU do their bit, not least in their entrepreneurship courses. Streamguys, our local and very cool Internet streaming company, streams Economic Fuel events for free. Local Toastmasters International clubs critique the elevator pitches. This list is not complete; the competition is one of the best examples I know of a true community effort.

That said, it wouldn't happen without the financial support and the original vision of Rob and Cherie Arkley. Regardless of how you feel about Mr. Arkley's politics or some of his projects, I submit to you that the Arkleys love this community and are passionate in their support of it, especially when it comes to youth. I'll also point out that the Economic Fuel staff, Kathy Miller and her crew, are terrific in execution. Economic Fuel stuff just goes well.

Young entrepreneurs are the core of Economic Fuel, although not all of the competitors are of traditional student ages. Their businesses have names like "Doors Wide Open," "Effie's Biscuits," "Humboldt Home Health Services," "KP's Chomp and Stomp," "Sherlock Records Management," "Shred Tec" and "Old World Construction." Some are ideas on the drawing board while some are businesses that are already underway in early stages. Many fuse environmental sustainability into their business plans.

Personally, I have always thought that Economic Fuel was not about the batting average ... that is, the percentage of the businesses that get founded and stay in business. I always thought it was about the home runs ... a few businesses that become the employers of dozens that continue our local tradition of innovation.

I came to see that the competition was also about a viral spread of entrepreneurship into younger and younger audiences. The Humboldt County Office of Education has created a high school business plan competition and is now seeking to expand it while, at the middle school level, a growing Junior Achievement presence is taking hold (watch this column for more on these projects). I believe we're seeing a new wave of entrepreneurs, not exclusively from Economic Fuel but congruent with it.

Some competitors who don't win continue with their business ideas. All have a different understanding of business based on having been through this exhaustive process. Whether they start their own business at some point or are employees, they have seen things through the entrepreneur's eyes.

It turns out, by the way, that I could be wrong about the batting average. Kathy tells me that 15 out of the 32 teams that have won a prize in the competition have gone into business.

So, if you want to see the businesses that are coming next, save the evening of April 30 for the Awards Ceremony. It's at 6:30 p.m. and you can either come to the Wharfinger or you can go to economicfuel.org for a link to the Streamguys feed.

This year's Economic Fuel winners might include a nicely thought-out arts management company. There might be a game-changing company with an amazing kinetic energy idea. There might be a new restaurant or two, or sustainable construction companies. All of these are real examples of this year's competitors.

If nothing else, tune in and you'll get a sense that the future of entrepreneurship in Humboldt County is in good hands.

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