

The Innovators

AUTHOR: LORI JOHNSTON

If necessity is the mother of invention, now is the time for Southwest Florida's innovators to shine. Tough economic times and a surge in federal funds have fueled fresh thinking and inventive ideas for businesses that promise to be the region's next success stories.

"For a small region, we generate a lot of ideas," says Tim Cartwright, president of the Naples-based Gulf Coast Venture Forum, whose investors often are the first to hear about new products and early-stage businesses in Southwest Florida and beyond.

The following six forward-thinking entrepreneurs and inventors on the Gulfshore are putting their novel business concepts to work in a diversity of sectors, from social networking to the green movement to assisting older residents.

BEAM ME UP

With Douglas Edwards' automatic pocket doors, homeowners might feel as if they're walking through a *Star Trek* set. He says he has developed an affordable system that improves space-saving interior pocket doors, which tend to slip off the tracks and pinch fingers. "When you walk up to it, it opens. When you walk past it, it closes," Edwards says.

Edwards, 47, who previously created in-store displays for companies including Tommy Hilfiger and Ralph Lauren, has a vision of making this the "door of choice" for all homeowners, although it's particularly well suited for people who are frail or disabled. His Fort Myers-based company, Automotion Pocket Doors, planned to start selling the doors this spring. Bathrooms are a key area for the doors (which lock), and they also can be installed in kitchens, laundry areas, garages and other spaces.

The \$1,500 price tag, which includes installation, remains hefty, compared to \$250 for a non-automated pocket door, but Edwards contends his are less expensive than the few automatic-door competitors on the market. "My plans are to make this as indispensable as a garage door opener," he says.

NO MORE SHOPPIN MAULS

Black Friday was good to retailers and Shayne Faerber. The 29-year-old, who waits tables in Naples, has created an iPhone application featuring maps of U.S. shopping centers. It rose to the top spot in paid reference iPhone apps after being spotlighted as the app to have during that frantic after-Thanksgiving shopping weekend. Thousands of people downloaded the "Mall Maps—You Are Here" tool for \$1.99, which launched earlier in November.

For seven months, Faerber input mall directories from around the country to help folks like him. "Honestly, I don't really like going to shopping malls too much, so I wanted to be in and out," he says. Faerber figured that building an iPhone application—a hot sector in software—could help direct people to the best parking spot and the fastest route to certain stores without having to make laps around a mall.

Faerber connected with developer MEDL Mobil, which agreed to finish development of the app if Faerber compiled the database of malls and more than 100,000 stores. Faerber gets 25 percent of profits (after Apple takes 30 percent off the top), but he isn't yet seeing enough in revenues to work on the app full-time. One of his goals is to hit 100,000 downloads, which could open the door to greater outside funding opportunities. "Everybody thinks once you have an app in the app store, it's like an instant million. Now that there's over 100,000 apps in the app store, it's hard to get noticed. People want the newest and crazy features," he says.

Mall Maps may soon be offered in Google's Android app store, which offers fewer applications right now, and with new features

that will improve a user's search and link with the iPhone's GPS. If only it would pay for a shopping spree.

WISH GRANTED

Paul Woods turned a "glorified hobby" into technology that he believes could successfully manage climate change. His concept, using algae to make ethanol using a process powered by the sun, hasn't gone unnoticed, either. The U.S. Department of Energy awarded his Bonita Springs-based Algenol Biofuels a \$25 million grant from stimulus funds, and the company is often spotlighted in major publications and Web sites as a key player in advanced biofuels. "We have the most advanced technology in the world," he says.

In early February, Lee County approved funds to help Algenol build a multimillion-dollar lab on Alico Road that is expected to create up to 200 jobs. If approval hadn't come through, the plan was to move the operation to Houston. Among Algenol's five major partners is Dow Chemical (much of the DOE grant funds a new refinery with Dow in Texas). The company has 12 collaborations and facilities globally and says it produces more than 6,000 gallons of ethanol per acre per year, compared with corn, which produces 400. "We're taking greenhouse gas and making a fuel out of it," says Woods, Algenol's CEO. "It's the only hope of taking huge quantities of carbon out of the atmosphere."

Reducing America's dependence on foreign oil and stabilizing energy prices also are potential benefits of the technology, which uses algae to make ethanol from carbon dioxide and seawater. Woods created the technology 25 years ago, when he was in his 20s. He started Algenol Biofuels here in March 2006, a few years after he sold United Gas Management—which at the time had more than 240,000 customers, 130 employees, more than 800 salespeople and \$75 million in revenue—and moved to the region at the age of 38. Woods believes Algenol will serve as an anchor for the great biotech boom community leaders hope for, and the product eventually will do more than fill up cars. "Putting us here is planting a seed for a whole lot of other companies to come," he says. "It is the very beginning."

EASY RIDER

Operating out of his Fort Myers garage, 77-year-old Mort Lashman manufactures electric motors for bicycles, one of many ahead-of-its-time products that he has created for everyday folks and famous figures. More than two decades ago, he sold a "James Bond"-like underwater propulsion vehicle to Jacques Cousteau, and continued making them for Cousteau's son after the famous underwater explorer died, he says. "I could make anything. I've invented so many things in my lifetime."

Electric Bike Factory and Electric Trike Company sell the 22-pound motor kits for \$495 to some of the country's biggest distributors and bicycle shops. Lashman and his wife constantly tweak the motors, which can reach 15 mph and fit any bicycle. Although fewer people bought motors last year, Lashman is emphasizing the green aspect of the bikes, hoping the growing eco-friendly movement will motivate people to buy his motors and leave their cars at home.

In strong years, the couple has created more than 1,000 units, and Lashman boasts never having a motor failure in 13 years. Among the users are senior citizens who need assistance getting around their neighborhoods and to stores. "I just want to make something that's easy for people to use," he says.

PET PROJECT

American Airlines pilot Mike Orr's inner entrepreneur spotted a niche in the sizeable pet industry. He created Social Animalz (www.socialanimalz.com), a free social-networking site similar to Facebook. It enables people to create profiles of their pets and post photos, videos and stories to share with other animal lovers. The site launched in April 2009 and has gone through three updates to add features, such as contests to build a worldwide community of pet owners and animal organizations.

Social Animalz is still small, with 2,500 hits topping its best week, but the optimistic Orr points out that traffic has tripled since he and Palm Springs-based Imagine It! Media in November unveiled the newest incarnation of the site, which also sells Social Animalz T-shirts and other products. The Pelican Marsh resident faces competition from other pet-centric sites and the behemoth, Facebook. But, he says, "If you go to a site like Facebook, you get everything—you get posts about basketball games and running errands. We wanted to narrow it down into a pet-centered site so that people who are really passionate about pets can go on and see what other people's pets are doing. I think that's our biggest advantage. You don't have to sift through all the other

information.”

One early lesson he’s learned as an Internet entrepreneur: “You think that when you first start out, this will be it. I’m going to take off and become the most successful Internet entrepreneur in the history of mankind. It’s not an immediate jump into profits galore.”

CALLING ALL CONSUMERS

Football fans often wager on games, so an invitation to text their predictions for the winners of the week’s NFL games in a mobile quiz isn’t far-fetched. But this wasn’t created by the NFL, a beer company or some other sports-centric business. Instead, it promotes the Diamond District, a client of Bruce J. Hershey II’s Naples-based Adz2Mobile. Those who texted the correct winners of each week’s games throughout pro football season won \$250 gift cards.

That and other fast-paced and buzzworthy mobile-marketing efforts have led local companies, such as John Marazzi Nissan and Stock Development Corp., as well as national brands like Anheuser-Busch and American Express to use Hershey’s two-year-old mobile-marketing agency. The benefit for companies: When folks respond via text, the company can add them to its list of potential customers. In the football game, the Diamond District added 1,200 names to its database. Hershey says the Anheuser-Busch effort resulted in 1,800 consumers opting in to receive alerts from the company.

Hershey still may be a bit ahead of his time in Southwest Florida. Mobile marketing—sending out quick SMS alerts about coupons, deals and games—isn’t a new idea, but it still isn’t widely used, partly because of misconceptions related to the cost of creating a texting campaign.

“A lot of people are sometimes afraid of change,” he says. “It’s evolved in the last year and a half. You’re seeing all the big brands now doing mobile in one fashion or another.”

What’s next for mobile marketing? Expect to see text codes replace 800 numbers, e-mail addresses and Web sites in ads, signs and other marketing efforts. “You can engage with that consumer right away,” Hershey says.