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## Startup Council provides entrepreneurs early expert advice

October 12th, 2009

By Allan Maurer

One of the complaints often heard from entrepreneurs and VCs who come to the Southeast from Silicon Valley is that the networking and support network for startups is just not as robust here as it is there. Startup Council, the brainchild of the Trevelino/Keller PR firm, is trying to help remedy that by holding quarterly roundtable events in which entrepreneurs meet with a variety of business experts for advice and insight on business development, funding, marketing, public relations, legal, accounting, outsourcing and branding.

*Dean Trevelino and Genna Keller, founders of Trevelino/Keller*

Members include Morris, Manning and Martin, Trevelino/Keller, CGA Tech Counsel, The Enfuse Group, Moreland Group, AcuityCFO, Ask Remco, Brandikon, Realistic Solutions, BChord, TechPedia, Hothouse Inc., Adams Capital, and the Content Factor. Affiliate supporters include ATDC, General Catalyst Partners, HIG Ventures, Imlay Investments Inc, Noro-Moseley Partners and Shulman Associates.

Launched in March 2006, the Startup Council has held eight events and seen 31 companies. Genna Keller, co-founder of Trevelino/Keller, says the flooding in Atlanta did keep a couple of companies away from the Sept. 22 event, but four showed up, all looking for angel or venture funding, two looking for "smart money," that comes with advisors or someone to step in and run the business side of their firms, she says.

Keller says she and her partner Dean Trevelino love working with startups and wanted to develop a way to do that in an engaging and useful manner. Since startups frequently lack resources to get their idea off the ground, "We came up with this idea to bring like-minded people together who understand a startup's unique needs and would give them counsel."

Some advisors have been with the council since day one, she says, such as Lance Weatherby of Georgia Tech's Advanced Technology Development Center. Others include attorneys from Morris, Manning and Martin, AcuityCFO, which provides outsourced accounting services, and others.

*Startup Council's TechSpartacus Web site*

"We pulled these folks together to meet every quarter," Keller says, although noting that they don't always maintain a quarterly schedule. The attending startups fill out an executive summary. At the event, the entrepreneur makes a ten minute presentation to the group, does ten minutes of questions and answers, and then receives individual feedback.

The feedback focuses on how the startup can best market its product or service. But the group also turns to its contacts to suggest that if a firm needs angel funding, it might consider a specific angel group or other source.

"It's a friendly format," says Keller. "We provide criticism and hope to provide contacts and advice to help them get to the next level. The folks we have advising them are not there to solicit their business. They're there to help them."



In addition to Atlanta, Trevelino/Keller did two events in South Carolina, one in Columbia, and one in Charleston in 2007 with SC Launch, the SCRA group. It will also hold events in Alabama.

“We’re open to taking this model to other markets in the Southeast,” says Keller, although so far they’ve stayed in markets where they have a physical presence. The application process, however, is open to companies throughout the Southeast, she adds.

The group collaborates with Startup Lounge, another Atlanta group focused on helping entrepreneurs.

Scott Burkett of Startup Lounge says, “To me, Startup Council is a brilliant example of how service providers can play a very critical, constructive role in any startup ecosystem. Too many service providers tend to focus on trying to extract financial value from cash-strapped entrepreneurs. This contributes to the somewhat negative view that many entrepreneurs have of service providers in general. By providing a gratis value-added service such as their quarterly roundtable forums, Trevelino/Keller is very wisely positioning themselves as a friend and advocate of the early-stage entrepreneur.”

Joe Reger, Jr., founder of Dneero.com, a startup founded in 2003, says his two visits to the Startup Council events about 9 months apart was a valuable process providing useful feedback, advice and contacts.

“They put together a panel from business, finance, marketing, technology and you present your concept. They kind of rip you to shreds. That’s a good thing. They find holes in what you’re presenting.”

### ***Keller and Trevelino working out strategy***

Although they’re antagonistic initially, they become more collaborative as the process continues, he adds. “They’ll say ‘What about this?’ or ‘Try that.’ I got a lot of good ideas and we worked with a number of folks we met there.”

He says his three-employee company actually walked away from a funding deal because as it “muscles through those first sales, our valuation will go up dramatically.”

One of the best pieces of advice he received from one of the Startup Council panelists, a marketing expert, was to be more confident about how unique their product is and to trumpet it more. “That’s not something that comes naturally to technology ‘geeks,’” he notes.

Dneero is developing a social network that creates buzz around a product or service by pairing it up with a charity. Whenever a blogger writes about the product, the charity gets a few dollars. This, says Reger, creates “A halo effect” from being associated with the charity. Dneero mediates the process.

“This is something brand new that could change the way you market and launch products,” says Reger, following the marketing advice he got at Startup Council.

Applications for Startup Council as well as details regarding the roundtable sessions can be found at <http://www.techspartacus.com/page/startup-council>

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