FUNDING REGIONAL VENTURES

A Southeastern Ohio partnership helps entrepreneurs grow.

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In Ohio's poorest county, entrepreneurs in Athens might struggle to find a foothold in the community. For technologically innovative businesses, Tech-GROWTH Ohio is taking entrepreneurs from the startup phase to explosive success in just a few years by giving them the fuel they need to advance. Such is the case for Ecolibrium Solar, which has more than doubled its sales each year and counting.

TechGROWTH Ohio is a $40 million private partnership led and managed by the Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs. It encompasses a network of collaborators and partners from within Ohio University and throughout Southeast Ohio. They also provide venture development services, as well as capital and talent, to help jumpstart technology-based companies in the region.

After receiving funding in 2007 from the Ohio Third Frontier, a $2.1 billion Ohio Development Services Agency initiative, TechGROWTH hit the ground running just one year later.

"I think over time that we've been able to establish a good, balanced approach that includes both services and investment capital," says Lynn Gellermann, executive director for TechGROWTH and OU's Center for Entrepreneurship.

"Early on, it was much more service and grant oriented. We've been able to help companies get to the threshold where they can compete for investment," he continues.

TechGROWTH has a few areas of technology under which their new entrepreneurs fall: advanced energy and environment, medical devices, Information Technology and some degree of advanced materials.

Gellermann explains that TechGROWTH examines creative technology presented to them by entrepreneurs who have the potential to either disrupt or complement a certain market, even if their companies don't fall in one of the above categories. He also adds that a lot of consideration has to do with the nature of the Southeast Ohio region, as well as the research and development completed at OU.

SWEET SUCCESS

The tech companies TechGROWTH has taken from startup to high-growth are nicknamed "gazelles;" Global Cooling Inc. and Ecolibrium Solar are both included in that category.

Global Cooling Inc. manufactures special freezers that store materials used in life-sciences research, biotech and pharmaceutical facilities, according to a recent case study published by TechGROWTH.

In the study, CEO of Global Cooling Neill Lane explains that these freezers — operating at temperatures below minus 80 degrees Celsius — have been around for years yet are basically identical on a technological basis. The downside is that they require as much energy as it takes to operate a whole household. Global Cooling has developed a new type of ultra-low temperature freezer that uses 66 percent less energy than the previously mentioned standard, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

Unfortunately, Lane faced several financial obstacles while manufacturing and creating the brand. Enter Tech-GROWTH, which assisted Global Cooling in writing a proposal that earned it a $1 million grant with the Third Frontier Advanced Energy Program. TechGROWTH and Lane

TechGROWTH Companies
- GhostBlind | Light weight camouflage
- Global Cooling Inc. | Low temperature laboratory freezers
- Marietta Sensors | Security systems
- Sanuthera Inc. | Hearing medical devices
- First Biotech | Innovative biotechnology reagents
- Promiliad | Drug discovery
- Ecolibrium Solar | Solar panel mounting system

worked together to develop a strategic business plan for the company and provide support, such as recruiting assistance in the process.

"The financing we do going forward can be traced back to TechGROWTH in terms of introductions," Lane writes in the study. Since then, Global Cooling's sales have doubled in the past two years. It is expected the same thing will happen two years from now.

In early summer 2010, TechGROWTH Director John Glazer brought in Brian Wildes, who is now chief technology officer of the company Ecolibrium Solar.
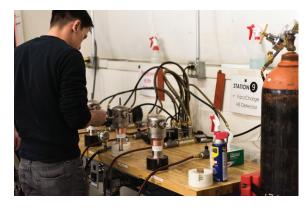
Ecolibrium Solar installs solar panels with a rack-mounting system made of 100 percent recycled plastic, which is less expensive, lighter and faster to install than traditional mountings. Without hesitation, Wildes declares that the firm's most prominent obstacle in the startup process was funding.

"You can't do anything without a significant amount of funds, and most individuals don't have those funds. A great idea goes nowhere without money," he says.

TechGROWTH also assisted Wildes with coaching and connecting him to consultants, contractors, and various angel groups around the area. In receiving these services, Ecolibrium Solar was provided with a competitive edge among other solar energy companies.

"When we came to market, there were less than 10 racking companies, and within a year, there were at least 30 or 40 of them. They all kind of saw the same need and came out the same time we did," Wildes recalls. "Most of them are gone already. We've been able to outlast that wave, and I think it had a lot to do with the strong financial backing. Tech-GROWTH helped lay that foundation."

Ecolibrium Solar — based in Athens — has exploded into a firm serving all 50 states, especially the East and West Coasts. Wildes says less than 1 percent of their sales come from Ohio.

THE CENTER FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Although developing technologically innovative businesses is the main focus of TechGROWTH, it also makes a significant effort to contribute as best it can to Ohio University's Center for Entrepreneurship. Gellermann explains that TechGROWTH had been one of the key drivers for the Center, which launched in 2011.

"Moving over to the Center for Entrepreneurship, the students have a strong appetite to learn more about entrepreneurship these days," he says. "[The Center] provides a whole spectrum of courses and outside-the-classroom experiences for students to get engaged. Really what we're teaching is entrepreneurship is a way of thinking critically and creatively. I believe that form of learning can help students, no matter what field they're in."

If a student is in the College of Business, he or she has the option of majoring in entrepreneurship. Students whose majors are not a part of the college are eligible to receive a Certificate in Entrepreneurship.

"If a student is involved with the Center for Entrepreneurship, then TechGROWTH will know a lot more about him or her and can better help them," Gellerman says. "Whether it's plugging them into an internship, a startup company or an idea pitch competition, there's lots of opportunities at OU these days for students."

Gellermann adds that the Center is not entirely technology-focused. Rather, it teaches entrepreneurship and provides those entrepreneurship encounters to students from all across the board, whether they are interested in opening a retail store or simply creating a new app. He describes the framework as how you start a business, how you run a business and how you develop a model for the business to make it work.

THE BIG PICTURE

Gellermann believes technology is pervasive, and exposure to it is critical because it teaches students about how it can be applied to what they want to start their own business in.

"It's important that students have some exposure to the technologies and tools that can help run the business, like technology to help market research, technology for effective point of sale, and methods for connecting with suppliers," he says.

On a more local scale, teaching entrepreneurship through TechGROWTH and the Center contributes significantly to helping Ohio University provide better interns — even employees — to the Athens community.

STILL "GROWING" STRONG

Lane, who was previously employed as an Executive in Residence with TechGROWTH, knows the success that TechGROWTH brings to its businesses is contagious.

"What TechGROWTH has done is create in Southeast Ohio an entrepreneurial venture community," Lane writes in the case study. "Speaking more broadly than just Global Cooling, that's

How an Individual or Company Can Qualify for TechGROWTH Assistance:

- Must have a substantial presence in all 20 counties in
- Southeast Ohio
- Must be an individual or company with less than 50 employees
- Must have less than $5 million in annual revenue
- Must have a technologically innovative idea, service or product

enormously valuable, because you want successes like Global Cooling to happen again and again. [The goal is] to create an environment that grows companies as a matter of course."

Ecolibrium Solar is more than doubling their sales every year. Gellermann adds that they employ almost 30 people and are hiring every week.

"Those companies hire students for internships and for full-time jobs, eventually, so it's a big ecosystem that can feed itself," Gellermann explains. "I think Ohio University and the larger Southeast Ohio community has really spent the last several years building the organizations and assets required to have a healthy ecosystem. Everyone has a role. You can be as engaged as you want to be. I think it's going to lead to a lot of really cool things in the future." **b**