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By Grant Walter

2018 LAUNCH PAD A SUCCESS



■ The 10 Launch Pad finalists were selected from the larger group of contestants based on the number of Facebook votes they accrued—a litmus test for their ability to succeed in the cyberworld of 21st-century commerce.

For the past few years, the Young Executives Network (YEN) has partnered with SEMA Education to co-host Launch Pad, the premier pitch-style competition for the automotive aftermarket. The event aims to inspire young and future entrepreneurs to pursue their visions and to highlight the strong entrepreneurial spirit running through the core of the industry. As SEMA expands its focus toward younger generations and emerging technologies, the event has grown to fill the Westgate International Theater with an audience comprised of Show attendees and students participating in the SEMA Show Student Program.

Months before the 2018 event, 15 semi-finalists were busy running social-media campaigns and spreading awareness of their startup companies far and wide across the web. The 10 finalists were selected from that group based on the number of Facebook votes they accrued—a litmus test for their ability to succeed in the cyberworld of 21st-century commerce.

“Launch Pad benefits [the participants] in two ways,” said Ron Coleman, CEO of COMP Cams and a Launch Pad judge. “They have to get organized enough to

bring a product to market, and even if they don’t win, they get a lot of exposure if they become finalists.”

The judges use criteria centered around both the quality/potential of the business and the skill of the presenter. Aside from Coleman, the 2018 judging panel included SEMA Chairman of the Board and Coker Group President and CEO Wade Kawasaki; SEMA Board member Greg Adler of Greg Adler Motorsports; Vaughn Gittin Jr. of RTR Vehicles; and Sean Holman of Motor Trend Group and a leading podcaster.

Each Launch Pad finalist receives a one-year SEMA membership, expenses-paid admission to the SEMA Show Exhibitor Summit, a kiosk-style booth in the Performance Pavilion at the Las Vegas Convention Center, SEMA Show badges, two banquet tickets, and a one-hour mentoring session with older industry heavyweights. (Based on YEN rules, participants cannot be over 40 years of age.)

In addition to the benefits awarded to the finalists, the winner receives a \$10,000 grant, turnkey exhibit space at the SEMA Show, a full-page color ad in *SEMA News*, hours of free scanning at the SEMA Garage, 50% off membership fees to the SEMA Data Co-op for one year, a meeting with the SEMA Manufacturers’ Rep Network, and \$5,000 worth of advertising with the Family Events Group.

“What YEN Launch Pad ultimately provides is a path forward for everyone involved,” said Bryan Harrison, director of networks for SEMA. “If participants work hard enough, they will succeed. It also shows that path to all the students in the audience who are looking at someone who is often just a few years older than they are doing something incredible. SEMA Education has also collaborated with YEN to allow students with bright ideas to apply for the competition.”

Matt Beenen, winner of the 2018 Launch Pad grand prize, said that he was excited just going into the final competition.

“I think most of us finalists had this mentality that it had kind of been a long road,” he said. “We originally applied in March, so we all felt like we had accomplished something just to get there. It was really just excitement. I wasn’t so much nervous, which is uncharacteristic, because I’m not typically an excited public speaker.”



■ Launch Pad finalists presented to a panel of industry-heavyweight judges. Pictured is Zach Kowalik (second left) as he demonstrated his Quick Covers.

Beenen is the owner of BuiltRight Industries, which debuted the Bedside Rack System. The system adds modular mounting panels to the inside walls of a normally featureless truck bed, enabling users to quickly and securely mount their choice of tools, equipment and accessories. The OEM fit and finish steel panels require no modification and offer easy installation with basic hand tools. In taking the grand prize, Beenen and BuiltRight became the sixth Launch Pad winner.

"I've had a lot of nice conversations at SEMA with people who would like to be customers themselves, as well as with more seasoned business people who have been willing to be advisors," he said of his experience at the Show. "I'm really excited to continue building those relationships and see where it goes, because the prize money is great but the real value is in the people who have stepped forward and been excited to help."

Here are some of the products and finalists judges considered this year:

Ryan Amesbury, NeoCharge

Ryan Amesbury founded NeoCharge with the goal of helping renters and homeowners gain access to level-two electric-vehicle charging without hiring an electrician. The 22-volt outlets can be costly to install and a hassle to get permits for, but homes, condos and apartments that are equipped with electric clothes dryers already have one wired in.

In that case, the NeoCharge LevelUp intelligently shares power between the vehicle and the dryer and is capable of

charging two vehicles at once if a dryer is not present, with a notable increase in charging speed. LevelUp increases charging speed from four miles to 25 miles of range per hour of charge. This means that a single hour of level-two charging will give users the equivalent range gained by an entire eight-hour night of level-one charging.

Amesbury said that getting the company out in front of a lot of people was a great experience, and he enjoyed presenting. The company is now close to its next phase.

"We have several prototypes out right now, and people who are using them really like them," Amesbury said. "We're going to do a small preproduction run next month to complete additional testing before we spend a bunch of money tooling up to go into full production."

Amesbury had this to say to those already pursuing an entrepreneurial path or thinking about it: "My advice would be to not underestimate yourself. Take a chance on things that you may not succeed in. If you are not pushing the limits, you will never improve. Also, there is no substitute for hard work, putting in the hours and learning from both your mistakes and successes."

Todd Earsley, My Shop Assist

Todd Earsley co-founded My Shop Assist because he saw a need for software that could work for aftermarket shops. My Shop Assist is a web-based project-management system that is designed to help aftermarket shops of any kind manage virtually every aspect of their work. Users

can schedule jobs, delegate tasks, log hours, track parts orders, store pictures, create invoices, determine employee efficiency, and then communicate progress to customers, and it integrates with QuickBooks to track accounting. Essentially, it is an all-in-one-place solution for shop administration, allowing everyone involved to spend more time working on vehicles.

The idea came out of immediate need. Earsley was working with his now partner at his shop building a Pike's Peak car. They looked for software, but there was nothing that was truly designed for serious aftermarket work, only "normal" repair work. In Earsley's words, "There aren't book-hours for making a flat-bottomed race car."

Stephen Hale, Stohd Outdoor

Stephen Hale started Stohd Outdoor with his dad to allow easy accessory and equipment stowage during doors-off Jeep adventuring. The Stohd Exoskeleton is a patented trail-door system for Jeep Wranglers. The doors have a unique protruding design to which specially engineered attachments can be mounted, such as folding chairs, camp stools, lockable high-impact dry/cool storage boxes, recovery gear/ramps, off-road tools, first-aid kits and more. The idea was born in 2016 when Hale's uncle was frustrated by an inability to lug chairs and other equipment to his son's football games with his doors-off Wrangler. The solution has evolved quite a bit since then, with an entire system of accessories in the works.

"We're about halfway through the engineering/prototyping phase, so we'll probably be ready to go into production early next year," Hale said. "Perseverance is key. No matter how good your idea is, you're going to run into problems along the way. Having the patience and grit to keep moving forward is what makes a successful entrepreneur. The biggest takeaway for us was the exposure and the mentorship opportunities that we've gained through the process."

Jonathan Hurley, ToolBox Widget LLC

Designed by Jonathan Hurley, ToolBox Widget is a 100%-modular tool-organizer.

SEMA ■ EVENTS

ing system for toolboxes. The individual wrench organizers allow the customer to add or subtract the amount of holders needed, allowing for complete customization of the toolbox. Features include strong magnets that hold everything in place, missing-tool indicators (bright orange that highlights missing tools), changeable size labels and a flexible material.

Hurley began the development process by making the tool holders for his own use. Whenever he showed friends his creations, they always wanted to buy some from him. He began beta-testing the product with professionals from motorcycle mechanics to airplane technicians. The feedback was constructive and positive, so he went into production.

Zach Kowalik, Original Appearance Mfg. (Formerly Quick Covers)

Quick Covers are precision-molded plastic covers that fit snugly over rusty or damaged areas on vehicles. They restore the original appearance yet cost only a fraction of the price of traditional body-shop repairs. They can't rust and, combined with a corrosion-inhibiting pretreatment, will provide a like-new appearance for years.

Zach Kowalik, founder of Original Appearance Manufacturing, said of his big moment onstage at the Westgate: "A few years ago, I would've been petrified by an audience that big, but when you've actually got legitimate skin in the game and it's your own business, it's a totally different perspective. Another thing that [the SEMA Show] opened our eyes to was how big the aftermarket is. We're from the Midwest, so we couldn't believe that there was a market for some of this stuff, but we know the cost of tooling, so there must be. What there aren't as much of are products that don't call attention to themselves.

"There are a lot of nuances you learn as you go. First, embrace the customers that you have and let your path to your consumers reveal itself. Second, it's a matter of perception: If you go in expecting a net positive return on investment in three months, who knows? If you go into it searching for a new perspective or are open for a new idea or insight to be revealed to you, then it's pretty easy to see the benefits."



■ A major (some would say the best) perk of being a Launch Pad finalist is the mentoring round tables. Many finalists come away from them with lasting connections.

Christopher Owens, Creative Fabrication and Coatings

The Last Drop Wrench allows users to drain oil filters in a safe and controlled manner before removal by puncturing them while they're still attached to the engine. The tool is fitted over the end of an oil filter and then struck with a hammer. Oil immediately flows out of the engine through the filter and into the pan in a controlled manner. The draining action helps eliminate the spills associated with traditional oil changes.

The idea for the Last Drop Wrench came in 1995 when Christopher Owens was a grease monkey at a local Chevrolet dealership during an oil-change special the dealership had going. After around 80 oil changes, with his hands and arms burned from fingertip to elbow, he quit the job the Friday after he'd joined. Now he hopes to save professionals and consumers alike time and hassle by making oil changes faster and reducing the associated cleanup time.

Kansas Sartin, Pakmule LLC

Pakmule is a fully TIG-welded cargo carrier that was designed by Kansas Sartin. Fabricated from 100% aluminum, Pakmule will never rust, weighs 42 lbs., and can handle 500 lbs. of cargo. It is designed to easily secure gear without diminishing access. The proprietary locking, anti-wobble connection keeps everything stable, even on bumpy back roads.

Sartin decided to go into business after

he built himself a personal prototype, designed to be sturdy and solve problems normally associated with hitch baskets. Friends and even strangers at gas stations asked him where they could get one. Now the business is up and running, and he is a two-time Launch Pad finalist.

"In the moments before going on stage, I was more nervous than I usually get in this type of situation," said Sartin of his time presenting at the finals. "But once I got on stage and passed the first sentence, I was fine. I was really pleased with the comments and questions that the judges had. The two biggest things to come out of the SEMA Show for me were the exposure and seeing other people with similar products to mine. It was encouraging."

George Schafer, SMS Auto Parts Co.

George Schafer is the president of SMS Auto Parts Co. Exposed Racks is a patented roof-rack system that has zero effect on vehicle aerodynamics when not in use. It installs in a matter of minutes on a Jeep Wrangler using the provided hand bolts. It can be removed or left on, only becoming exposed when the soft top is down. The "Quick Clip" system allows users to click in accessories such as kayak mounts in less than one second.

The company's first target market was the Jeep Wrangler, but it is also targeting other vehicles. Schafer said that the product opens myriad possibilities.

"A guy is going to be driving down the road with his bicycle mounted on top of

his convertible Ferrari, a car you would never normally put a crossbar on,” he said. “Because of our solution—a bar that goes underneath the canvas—he’s going to pull the bike down and go riding that same day.”

Ed Uehling, King Tailgates

Ed Uehling co-founded King Tailgates with the simple idea of accessorizing the largely unaccessorized tailgate. The KT1 is an upgraded aftermarket replacement option for OEM tailgates. The utility-patented design splits open in a clamshell manner to allow for the incorporation of enclosed seating, dual oversized cup holders, a removable Bluetooth speaker, and USB charging ports.

Originally designed to fit on only two or three truck models, King Tailgates’ new patented protection allows the company to make tailgates for almost any marque. Beyond that, there are new and different accessory options being designed, greatly expanding the product line and the possi-

bilities of what can be done with a tailgate.

Uehling is a two-time finalist at Launch Pad, having first presented during the 2017 event.

“It’s the second year for us, so I kind of knew what to expect, but the judges were new, so that was different,” Uehling said. “I think the biggest payoff that we’ve gotten so far was the networking. We still have a little bit of product development to do before we move into production, so the types of people that we were able to meet through Launch Pad are the types of people we normally wouldn’t have been able to gain access to. We got a lot of helpful insights throughout the SEMA Show from some real industry leaders.”

Uehling’s advice to peers was concise but poignant: “The advice I would give to students or fellow entrepreneurs is aim for the top and embrace change when necessary.”

Return of the Alumni

Despite Launch Pad being a single event, alumni of the program often stay engaged

long after their stints as competitors have ended. Many past competitors are on the Launch Pad task force, helping put the event together and selecting semi-finalists. Judges often become mentors at round table sessions that are valuable opportunities for finalists past and present.

“In fact, we still have Jonathan Mill, our first-ever Launch Pad winner, come to the round table for mentoring,” said SEMA’s Harrison of the lasting mentoring relationships that are formed.

Coleman commented about his experience as a judge: “You’ve got to be open-minded. Some guys come in and already know everything you’re going to tell them. The ones who make progress are open to healthy criticism. On Launch Pad, we try to keep it positive and constructive, because our goal is to help everybody get to the next level with their products.”

Launch Pad continues the search for the next great business in 2019, with the application period set to open in early March. For more information about the program, visit www.sema.org/launch-pad. 📺



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