

Tapping into new markets

Discovering a hidden market in Rothesay, N.B. has led two University of New Brunswick students to pitch a business plan as far as Vancouver, B.C.

Bob Keleher and Simon Pearn, two business students studying at UNB Fredericton, found a new market in 2007 when Keleher realized that fewer homeowners wanted fresh coats of paint in the summer - because homes were increasingly using vinyl siding instead of wood.

The pair's business, Power Washing Solutions, cleaned over 100 houses in Rothesay and Saint John, N.B. last year - and cleaned house when it came to business plan competitions. Their proposal, based upon Power Washing Solutions, placed them in first place at the UNB CIBC Business Plan Competition last fall.

Keleher and Pearn's business plan went on to qualify at the Atlantic Regional Enterprise Canada competition undergraduate track, which took them to the national competition in Vancouver in February. The pair placed fifth place in Canada, competing against both undergraduate and graduate-level teams.

Refining the business model

What started out as an alternative to painting soon became a breakthrough idea with national recognition.

Power Washing Solutions stands out because of "a pricing advantage," says Keleher, "based on the type of equipment we use."

He's wary of revealing the secret to the group's success, though - "I don't want to say more without giving too much away."

He and Pearn have developed a three-year plan that will see the startup company expand into six Atlantic Canadian cities. This summer, the two will be sticking close to home - Keleher is looking after the business in Saint John, and Pearn is managing it in Fredericton.

They will also have four additional workers to assist with the power washing - all of whom are UNB students.

"There's no big name in the industry right now for power washing," says Keleher. "Although vinyl siding is not new, its expansion recently is huge. The majority of new houses that are built are vinyl sided. A house built three or four years ago with vinyl siding is just getting dirty now. They need someone to clean it - well, who does that? Power Washing Solutions does that."

Pearn explains that going through the numerous business plan competitions has helped the duo refine their business model.

"We've met with investors, we've met with clients, people that want to have their houses cleaned - hundreds of them," says Pearn. "They've told us how we should do things, and a lot of them have given us great input. We've gotten tips we wouldn't have gotten if we didn't get to go to all these competitions."

Investing in students

UNB helped Keleher and Pearn morph from a duo with a pressure hose to a pair with a plan - their business courses helped them learn just how to market their business.

The Faculty of Business Administration's International Business and Entrepreneurship Centre (IBEC) also helped the pair get across the country to pitch their plans.

"We wouldn't have been able to make it to Halifax or Vancouver if it weren't for the funding we got through IBEC," says Pearn.

IBEC not only got them across the country - this fall, it will put a whole new business idea in their hands. Keleher and Pearn have been selected to be team leaders with the IBEC's Activator Program, which gives entrepreneurial-minded students the chance to create a business plan around a freshly-designed product or service, many of which were designed at UNB.

The program is traditionally only offered to MBA-level students, but Keleher and Pearn have made a strong enough mark to be invited to the program during their undergraduate degrees.

"It supports research that's been done here and products UNB has come up with," says Keleher. "At the same time, you're training business students how to start businesses, find investors and do competitions."