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SEARCH

The Top 25 Innovators and Entrepreneurs

By Manny Frischberg and Eric Lucas; additional reporting by Jeff Bond, Jenna Curry, Andrew Freeman, Randy Woods



Photo of Christina Lomasney by John Keatley

Young business Turks like Peter Crabtree and Aseem Badshah don't seem to realize how difficult this business stuff is supposed to be.

Badshah, already an entrepreneurial veteran at 19, envisions remaking the educational system so it is more relevant to the lives of today's kids. Crabtree, an 18-year-old chocolate maker, is just a natural-born

entrepreneur, who has excelled at just about any business he has so far put his mind to.

Badshah and Crabtree are two of the most intriguing candidates in Seattle Business Monthly's third-annual list of the state's Top 25 Innovators and Entrepreneurs. From scientists using nanotechnology to invent the next generation of body armor to a food entrepreneur searching for the perfect taco, we have scoured the state for the creative thinkers who you may not yet know, but who are developing the products, inventions and business methods that have the most potential to affect your life.

Our list was compiled by seeking out suggestions from venture capitalists, academics, trade groups and business leaders from various industries about who they see as the region's emerging talents.

This year, we have decided to go beyond our usual list of 25 to spotlight some companies that may not be quite ready for prime time. We are including companies that remain in "stealth" mode as they continue to develop their initial products. We are also profiling the young winners of the University of Washington's Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship annual business plan competition. While competition winner, Gravity Payments, is already on its way to becoming a billion-dollar business, others taking part in the process are still on the drawing board.

Of course, some of these firms are destined for failure, while some are poised for major success. But, we believe, all have the potential of making a major impact on the region for years to come.

Mind Over Metal: Christina Lomasney (founder, Modumetal & Isotron)

Christina Lomasney's first go at founding a company was a flop. Isochip was based on a great

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idea for simplifying semiconductor design, but for various reasons, never achieved commercial success.

"Every time we fail, we learn something new," Lomasney says, proffering an idea espoused by luminaries ranging from Plutarch to Tom Peters. "I'm still making lots of mistakes, but I'm learning." Learning pretty well, apparently; her second company, Seattle-based Isotron, is a thriving environmental services firm that helps remediate toxic contamination.

Her newest venture, Modumetal, uses innovative metal-deposition nanotechnology to create ultra-strong, lightweight alloys for military and industrial applications such as vehicle and body armor for U.S. troops in Iraq. (This application, which is still under review by military officials for field use, has a personal facet—two of Lomasney's brothers are in the military.)

A physicist by training, Lomasney's expertise is in electrochemistry, and she devised many of the processes that Isotron uses to extract heavy metals from groundwater. But she's also a business adventurer who quotes Garibaldi and Theodore Roosevelt. Turning ideas into practical products strikes her as the inherent climax of research.

Recalling her experience with Isochip, Lomasney says that she "got an excellent lesson in the difference between a cool idea and a marketable product." Two more companies later, she confesses that she may well be a serial entrepreneur—and that she derives as much from the struggles of business creation as she does from any eventual success.

"I've seen too much research remain just that," Lomasney explains. "I like to see things come to fruition." Thus, when she was working at Boeing right out of college, and conceived a way to simplify semiconductor circuit design, she proposed it to her boss. Great idea, but we don't do that here, he replied. Why don't you take a sabbatical and see what you can do?

That's exactly what she did, and more than a decade later, with three startups under her belt, she declares such enterprises intrinsic to her character. "It's almost impossible for me not to try to start up something," she says.

Powering Down PCs: Kevin Klustner (CEO, Verdiem)

Ever wonder how much power is wasted on PCs that are constantly left running when no one is around to use them? Kevin Klustner does, and his Seattle-based startup, Verdiem, aims to do something about it.

While there are energy-saving options built into Windows, "most of these solutions don't offer a way to measure or report on PC network energy consumption or savings," Klustner says. "And many of these approaches can only offer one-size-fits-all power policies that compromise the diverse needs and schedules of end users."

Verdiem's Surveyor 4.0 software, however, "keeps track of when users actually use their computers and automatically adapts the energy efficiency settings to their usage patterns," Klustner says.

The five-year-old company now claims more than 100 customers and recently received an \$8.33 million vote of confidence in the form of venture funding, led by Silicon Valley's Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers.

Current Events: Burton Hamner (CEO and founder, Puget Sound Tidal Power)

Burton Hamner is hoping for a sea change in the alternative energy industry—quite literally. A veteran of clean technology research in 15 countries, Hamner is a fan of thinking big: He aims to harness the energy potential found in the tides as they funnel through the tight spots in Puget Sound, such as the Tacoma Narrows.

Hamner, president and founder of Puget Sound Tidal Power (PSTP), plans to evaluate a variety of different underwater turbines to capture the tides' energy—a project that is considered one of the most challenging of its kind. A 1995 study estimated that the tidal flow at the Narrows can furnish electricity to more than 70,000 homes. In January 2007, Tacoma Power awarded PSTP a \$300,000 contract to continue its investigation of the power-generating capabilities in the Narrows area. Results of the study, Hamner adds, should be ready next month.

Modern-Day Alchemy: Don Stevens (chemist, PNNL)

Turning straw into liquid gold—or fuel, as we mortals call it—is on everybody's mind these days. Don Stevens is one of the Rumpelstiltskins at Pacific Northwest National Laboratory working on a variety of approaches to do it. Now a senior project manager, the Ph.D. chemist has focused on this problem for most of his 30-year career.

Making ethanol from corn is simple, but competing demands for the crop are already driving up the price of Fritos. Stevens is exploring different ways to perform the same alchemy economically with woody waste, from poplars to corn stalks. He predicts that commercial-scale biomass-fuel factories will be converting such materials in about five years, though he won't bet just yet on which processes will be the winners.

Scrubbing Bubbles: Pierre Mourad (co-founder and Consulting Scientist, Ultreo Inc.)

While lots of people think in the shower, Pierre Mourad conceived one of his best ideas while brushing his teeth.

He noticed all the foam from the brushing action and thought, Aha!

Yes, really. Mourad is an expert on the physics of bubbles, and foam is nothing but lots of bubbles.

"Bubbles can do lots of things. jewelry cleaner? That's foam—bubbles," explains Mourad, who, among his many jobs, is a research associate professor in the Department of Neurological Surgery at the University of Washington (UW).

He also is an expert on ultrasound. And at his aha moment, Mourad conceived of a way to combine the two disciplines into a better toothbrush.

Yes, really. The result was the creation of the Ultreo, the newest power toothbrush on the market. It might loosely be described as combining ultrasound technology with a Sonicare toothbrush technology.

If you don't think a better power toothbrush is a significant contribution to human health—not to mention medical commerce—then you haven't asked your dentist. Mourad did.

"If I have any skill, it's being able to stand with one foot in each of two disciplines, physics and medicine," says Mourad, who is also a physicist at the UW applied physics lab. "And since I'm very social, I hang out with docs and physicists a lot. And I ask them what technology they wish they had. I'm also very inquisitive."

The answer he got from his dentist was a toothbrush that would do a much better job removing plaque, the bacterial coating that leads to gum disease. The Ultreo combines ultrasound and bubble physics to achieve the goal Mourad's dentist longed for.

Since the Ultreo's release in February, about 20,000 of the high-tech toothbrushes have been sold through dental offices, professional outlets and the company's website. It is scheduled to hit the retail market this month.

Mourad is no one-brush wonder. He is credited with 20 invention disclosures at UW, has three patents and about 13 more patent applications in the works. Counting Ultreo, he has been involved in the founding of two companies and his technological innovations have led to the forming of two other firms. His work on bubble technology has even been used in the pharmaceutical industry as part of a drug delivery system.

"I'm insatiably curious. That's all," Mourad says of his secret to success. "I've been very lucky to be able to make such a fun career out of it."

No Pain, Much Gain: Greg Demopulos (co-founder, Omeros Corp.)

For many medical practitioners, becoming an orthopedic surgeon might be considered a crowning professional achievement. For Greg Demopulos, founder of Seattle biotech firm Omeros Corp., it was just another stop on his career path.

While completing his residency at Stanford University in the early 1990s, Demopulos co-developed an anti-inflammatory/analgesic product with a neurosurgeon colleague named Pamela Palmer. In 1994, the success of the medication, which eased joint pain following arthroscopic surgery, attracted Seattle-based investors who asked Demopulos if he wanted to form a company based on the drug product.

Thirteen years, five venture rounds and \$80 million later, the result is Omeros, which is currently developing no less than six new drug candidates for medical disorders that run the gamut from schizophrenia to restless legs syndrome. The original anti-inflammatory/analgesic drug that Demopulos and Palmer created is now called OMS103HP and is undergoing Phase III trials that are expected to end in mid-2008.

Anecdotally, however, Demopolos already knows that OMS103HP works: "I've received it," he says. Following a knee operation, during which the experimental drug was added to the irrigation solution, Demopolos says, "I felt no post-operative pain and had good function." Now that's confidence in your product.

The Gadget Master: Andru Edwards (founder Gearlive.com and Seattle Mind Camp)

Andru Edwards' fascination with gadgets and gear was just an online hobby until the day he did a little simple arithmetic. "I was working about an hour a day on Gearlive.com and making up to \$400 a month on click-through ads and such," he recalls. "Hmmm. What if I pursued Gearlive full time? Coincidentally, at the time I was disenchanted with my day job."

So Edwards ditched his job at a finance company, and within six weeks transformed Gearlive into a thriving enterprise. Today, it draws 2 million unique viewers each month to read reviews of products that range from head-cooling pillows to obscure tech-power boosters that only the hardest-core geeks could possibly care about. Gearlive's roots began in the blogosphere (Edwards started the site mainly for his family and friends), but it aims for content with more substance and less blather than the usual blog review.

Edwards is also the founder of Seattle Mind Camp, an annual, intensive 24-hour confab for 250 techies. He says he created the event so he could spend time with the best digitally oriented thinkers in the region. "Cool, huh?" he adds. "I get to rub elbows with the real experts while we're all having fun."

Building a Better Chip: Cameron Fisher (president, CEO and co-founder, Mobile Semiconductor)

Why did Cameron Fisher start a company in semiconductors, one of the world's most competitive industries?

"I like the challenge," laughs the former director at Virage Logic, where he developed the memory chip for the Motorola Razr3 phone.

Mobile Semiconductor, Fisher's Bainbridge Island startup that is moving into a new Seattle headquarters this month, is setting some lofty goals—one of which is to create the architecture for the next generation of memory chips for mobile applications. The company's plan is not only to achieve enhanced performance in the chips but also to create customer-friendly designs that address the precise needs of equipment manufacturers. "We ask, what are you going to need, rather than try to sell what we have already done," Fisher explains.

Once a design is finalized, the company will likely outsource actual production; Fisher predicts his first product shipment in late 2008. As for the commoditized nature of chip manufacturing, "nobody wants to buy a \$1,000 cell phone," he acknowledges, genially. "That gives a good design company many opportunities to put a wedge in the industry."

The Cocoa Kid: Peter Crabtree (founder and CEO, CBC Chocolates)

Peter Crabtree was born to be an entrepreneur.

According to family lore, Crabtree, who grew up on a 160-acre farm near Kingston, announced at the age of 5 that he was going to own a bakery. At the age of 9, he started raising his own Angus cattle, which he sold throughout the Pacific Northwest and California. By 12, he was selling 10 times more raffle tickets than anyone else in his school. Now, at the age of 18 and entering his senior year at West Sound Academy in Poulsbo, he's taken his life savings (about \$50,000) and invested it into launching his own chocolate company, CBC Chocolates.

But these are no ordinary chocolates. Crabtree has grabbed the attention of some local venture capitalists and the Theo Chocolate company with his unique truffles that are flavored with ... beer. That's right. While he's not even old enough to legally savor the heady brew, he is extracting the flavor of the Scotch Ale produced by Silver City Brewery in Silverdale and adding it to his truffles.

"Most people get kind of a disgusted look on their faces and think it's not going to be very good when I tell them about the beer-flavored chocolates," Crabtree says. "But once they try them, I haven't had anyone tell me they dislike the chocolates yet."

Crabtree got hooked on making chocolate truffles during his freshman year when he took a culinary arts class. Along with his buddies, Spencer Coplan and Matthew Baran-Mickle, Crabtree began producing chocolates on borrowed equipment and then selling the creations at school

during lunch. That summer, the students sold their chocolates at the Poulsbo farmer's market.

After his classmates bowed out of the business, Crabtree increased production and talked the Poulsbo Central Market into stocking his "Brew Series Truffles." More recently, he opened his own Poulsbo storefront and coffee shop where he sells his chocolates. He also developed packaging modeled after a six-pack, complete with handles. By putting a second layer of sweets in the box, he creates a half-rack of beer-flavored chocolates.

As for the future, Crabtree plans to make custom beer-flavored chocolates for many of the state's microbreweries. He plans to produce wine-flavored chocolates to sell at local wineries. While he's gotten a lot of interest from investors, Crabtree is taking his time about asking for outside capital.

"I'm trying to do everything with my own financial backing," Crabtree says. "I want to keep as much control as I can, for now."

Talkin' About a Revolution: Aseem Badshah (founder and CEO, Scriptovia.com)

Aseem Badshah is itching for an education revolution.

The restless 19-year-old wunderkind, who has been tagged by some technology pundits as a young entrepreneur to watch, says he's made the first step with Scriptovia.com.

Even if you haven't heard of the document-sharing site yet, chances are your high-school-age children know all about it by now. Scriptovia, which was launched in May, is an interactive networking site that enables students to post their schoolwork online, providing "inspiration" and ideas to other students.

The posted materials are part of a growing storehouse of more than 2,000 reports that cover everything from literature to science to history. The site also lets students critique the posted materials.

"We want to be the portal that all students log onto every night before they start their homework," says Badshah, a sophomore at the University of Washington. "We want to help students connect with a community."

Badshah, who started the site using his own money and the financial backing from family and friends, dismisses the claim that Scriptovia is an "essay mill," where students can copy the work of others. He says the site uses technology to deter cheating and that there are plenty of online tools teachers can use to determine the originality of an essay.

Besides, Scriptovia is just the beginning. Badshah, a former Microsoft consultant, envisions his portal as helping to move the educational system away from its current tired structure of memorizing facts and figures, and toward a focus on analyzing and interpreting information. He hopes it will also help schools adopt new technologies that are relevant to a student's future.

Says Badshah, "Schools need to be brought into the 21st century."

Stop, Look & Listen: Alex Castro (CEO and co-founder, Pluggd.com)

The "Find" function on word processors makes searching for things a snap in documents. Seattle startup Pluggd means to do the same for audio and video files with its "HearHere" and "SeeHere" web services.

Type in a keyword and Pluggd shows a "heat bar" that points to where the relevant content is found. Content providers can either pay a service fee for Pluggd to search within their video content or form a revenue-sharing agreement with the company to target contextually relevant ads for that content, says CEO Alex Castro, a Microsoft alum who worked on speech recognition at Bell Labs when he was a student.

The beta version of Pluggd.com has been impressive enough to attract an overall investment of \$6 million from Intel Capital. Pluggd also launched its HearHere service on the CNet.com platform in June.

King of the Kitchen: David Holcomb (founder and CEO, Chef'n)

When he was a boy of 10, David Holcomb wanted just one thing in the world more than any other. He daydreamed about it. He begged his grandparents to get it for him. No, not a skateboard or an Erector Set.

Holcomb wanted a Veg-O-Matic.

"I was enthralled by the commercials," Holcomb remembers. "You put a whole onion in and it was transformed into neat piles of chopped onion. Fabulous."

That's the foundation of Holcomb's Chef'n, a Seattle-based firm that has created hundreds of kitchen gadgets ranging from the iconic one-handed pepper grinder (known as the "PepperBall") to a special tool for eating crab called the WiseCracker. To date, the company has been granted more than 250 patents worldwide on its kitchen tools and it is awaiting patents on more than 100 other creations. Despite such success, Chef'n has kept a low profile locally because its line of more than 70 clever and colorful items is largely sold online or through wholesalers.

The Chef'n idea factory works like this: Holcomb dreams up the basic ideas for most of the products and then turns the exact implementation over to a team of designers "who make me look really good."

Holcomb got his first taste of business success while in his early 20s when he began manufacturing skateboards in 1973. He sold the company for "way more money than any 20-something ought to have" and moved to Hawaii. When the money ran out and he returned to Seattle, Holcomb started working in the restaurant industry. He quickly noticed that many kitchen implements didn't work as well as they should.

Thus, the impetus for his first gadget: an improved garlic press that he dubbed the "Garlic Machine." In 1982, he founded Chef'n and has been inventing ever since. The fact that kitchen gadgetry is one of the most hotly competitive industries on earth didn't deter him.

"I knew about manufacturing from the skateboard days and I'm a risk taker," Holcomb says. "I like to roll the dice. If I'm sitting on the edge of a cliff, the question isn't will I jump off. I know I'm going to jump."

That in mind, Holcomb, who had been known as Chef'n's "Famous Inventor," recently became its CEO and chief stockholder as well. But he plans to keep right on inventing and maintains he hasn't lost sight of the initial fascination that spurred him at the age of 10. "I just really like cooking."

Travel that Comes to You: Brett Allsop (co-founder, Yapta.com)

Brett Allsop broke onto the web scene when he founded Fogdog Inc. and transformed it into the internet's leading sporting goods retailer. His new project, Yapta.com, which he co-founded with CEO Tom Romary, is an innovative airline ticketing approach that Allsop hopes will take the travel industry by storm as well.

Available nationwide, Yapta uses e-mail to alert potential customers when the price of a ticket drops or rises. Should the cost of purchased tickets fall after they have been purchased, Yapta will notify buyers and suggest that they request refunds or coupons from airlines—an element that sets Yapta apart from other travel sites such as Farecast or Expedia.

In July, Yapta closed a \$3 million Series A investment round, led primarily by First Round Capital. However, Allsop says, the company plans to generate most of its revenue through advertising sales, with some additional money coming from affiliate fees charged to airlines.

Making Lawyers Squirm: Mark Britton (CEO and founder, Avvo)

The days of thumbing through the Yellow Pages or relying on word of mouth to find a lawyer may be coming to an end thanks to Avvo, an online attorney rating service.

Launched in June with the help of \$13 million in venture capital, the Avvo.com website lists profiles for every lawyer in nine states and the District of Columbia, covering about 80 percent of the nation's lawyers, says Mark Britton, Avvo's CEO and founder, and a former general counsel for Expedia. Since early July, more than 100,000 consumers have visited the free site.

Similar to other rating sites such as Amazon for books or Monster for jobs, Avvo provides lawyer profiles and gives each a rating on a scale of one to 10, with 10 being the best. The rank is calculated by a mathematical model combining state bar scores, court records, peer endorsements and other publicly available sources.

Just days after its inception, however, Avvo was sued by (you guessed it) lawyers who say the scores are unfair and inaccurate. Britton, who counters that his company has a First Amendment right to rate legal services, says that his site "will continually change as new technologies and more lawyer information becomes available."

Image Consciousness: David Norris (Chairman & CEO, OnRequest Images)

David Norris wants your business to be original.

A longtime entrepreneur who is working on his fourth startup, Norris launched OnRequest as a new wrinkle in the world of corporate branding and marketing. His aim is to end the business community's reliance on used imagery in its advertising, websites and marketing materials. Instead, OnRequest is creating a worldwide network that connects 1,600 photographers in 53 countries; this group can shoot an original corporate image almost anywhere on the planet. The company's patent-pending technology allows OnRequest to automate the photography work and image handling.

OnRequest has developed unique tools for helping companies brand their products and track their images. It can analyze a company's artwork and find out if a firm's unoriginal images are also being used by other businesses, an embarrassing problem that happens more often than companies realize.

These branding bells and whistles have helped OnRequest grow by about 400 percent in 2006 and the same rate of growth is expected this year. The company's success has caught the eye of the venture community, as well, with a number of local firms investing millions in the startup.

Norris, who has won various awards for his entrepreneurial exploits in the technology field, says he is enjoying the process of building OnRequest.

"I'm definitely a serial entrepreneur," Norris says. "I like building new companies. I think it's a lot of fun."

No More Snail Mail? Ron Wiener (CEO and founder, Earth Class Mail)

When serial entrepreneur Ron Wiener first came up with the concept for a remote-access mail service, he thought of putting a camera in his mailbox to view its contents before making a trip to the post office. His result—Earth Class Mail, a centralized service that digitizes conventional snail mail—has proven to be surprisingly popular among venture capitalists and the business press.

Here's how it works: Customers have their mail forwarded to a remote facility in which each envelope is scanned and sent via e-mail. Clients—usually those who travel a lot—are then given the options of having the mail shredded and recycled; opened, scanned and the contents e-mailed; or forwarded directly to their physical addresses. All mail is handled by military veterans with Department of Defense security clearances to ensure confidentiality.

Exactly who would use such a hybrid service is still a bit unclear, but the company does not suffer from lack of financial and media attention. While Wiener would not provide specific figures, he says Earth Class Mail has already received a "large amount" of venture capital, mostly from Ignition Partners and Keiretsu Forum. Wiener's firm will also be the subject of a serialized documentary for high-definition cable TV called "Startup Junkies," debuting in January 2008 on the MOJO Network. Stay tuned.

From A Fishy Idea... James Schmidt (co-founder, Taco Del Mar)

James Schmidt was absolutely certain he was going to revolutionize Northwest fast food with fish tacos. Weren't they the most popular food-cart item in San Diego? "They outsell hot dogs," says Schmidt, who studied history at college in Southern California.

Schmidt had also managed a snack bar at the Roche Harbor Resort on San Juan Island as a teenager, and returned to the Puget Sound region in 1992 with a culinary notion that he was convinced would be a winner. It didn't go quite as he had planned.

"What seemed like such a great idea was a terrible blunder," recalls the co-founder of Taco Del Mar. "To Seattle residents at the time, the word 'taco' meant ground beef, and translated to fish tacos, that means ground fish, which is icky. They were an abject failure as our signature item."

Luckily, Taco Del Mar had another aspect that proved a success: high-quality, freshly made Mexican fast food. "That's what did succeed," Schmidt explains, "and today Taco Del Mar is basically a top-quality burrito stand." And a most popular one—there are almost 300 Taco Del Mar restaurants nationwide; the company expects more than \$80 million in sales this year, and almost double that, about \$130 million, in 2008.

Not a bad outcome for an entrepreneur who started his business with \$22,000, found out that he really needed \$32,000 and stayed open only because his vendors carried him for almost two years. Now, almost all of those Taco Del Mar outlets are franchises; the one exception is a single store that the company owns outright. Although fish tacos remain a centerpiece on the menu, the original reaction that greeted them still holds—chicken is the top-selling item, followed by veggie tacos.

“So my success is based on a failure,” Schmidt admits. “The lessons are simple: Be patient. Listen to your customers and be willing to adapt. Treat your customers and employees well, and offer lots of quality food for the money.”

Under the Radar

These three intriguing Seattle-based firms are still in stealth mode, but we may see them in the spotlight by next year.

AdReady — Created by Classroom.com alums Aaron Finn, Eric Kolve and Dave Sliwa, this stealthy startup reportedly will offer clients the ability to create inexpensive, customized online display ads. According to the Judy’s Book blog, AdReady may do for online advertising what the Los Angeles-based Spot Runner service does for TV—acting as both an ad agency and media buyer that allows small businesses to buy advertising spots that they could not otherwise afford. The limited information provided by the beta version of AdReady.com says the new company will help make “great design intelligence accessible to everyone.” Already backed by the Madrona Venture Group, AdReady recently received an additional \$2 million in venture capital.

Illumita — Founded in 2006 by computer science grad student Dave Richardson and three other colleagues at the UW, this hush-hush startup has gleaned \$6 million from several venture firms, including Ignition Partners, the Madrona Venture Group and Bezos Expedition. Illumita seeks to “virtualize” data servers by dividing them into multiple, independent entities that can run several different applications simultaneously; if one of these “virtual servers” has a problem, the other servers will not be affected. Such technology, experts say, may be able to increase server efficiency by a factor of seven. According to Illumita’s website, the server virtualization market may be worth \$20 billion by 2010.

Hypertext Solutions — According to the blogosphere, only two things are known about this mysterious web-search startup: 1) it has something to do with “natural language processing,” which is designed to make human speech easier for computers to understand and manipulate; and 2) it has received an unknown amount of financial backing from the deep pockets of Paul Allen’s Vulcan Ventures. Even the Hypertext name is said to be a placeholder until more details are revealed. The web site says only that the fledgling company is now hiring specialists in artificial intelligence, systems management and data mining, and that it will “tap the potential of ‘intelligent’ data on the web.” In early August, Hypertext paid Seattle’s Insightful Corp. \$3.65 million for the intellectual property rights of Insightful’s InFact web search technology. Stay tuned.

Two to Tango: Rick Woodbury (founder and CEO, Commuter Cars Inc.)

Rick Woodbury didn’t think his teacher was passing on correct information to her class, so he challenged her.

“I wasn’t a very good student, but I knew that thunder wasn’t the result of two clouds bumping together,” Woodbury recalls.

He was 5. That was in kindergarten.

Today, the Spokane-based inventor is challenging a much bigger and more stubbornly held public notion—that cars must be wide vehicles that hold two or three people side by side.

Woodbury’s company, Commuter Cars Inc., is the creator of the Tango, a 39-inch-wide electric car that costs between \$108,000 and \$148,000 each (depending on the type of batteries included), zooms from zero to 60 in 4 seconds, meets racetrack safety parameters, ranges up to 160 miles, travels side-by-side in highway lanes and carries two passengers, one in front, one in back. He’s delivered one ... to George Clooney. Woodbury also has firm orders for 10 more, which he plans to deliver within a year.

Lacking the \$50 million needed to mass-produce the cars, Woodbury and his team, which includes his son, Bryan, build about 90 percent of each car by hand. The remaining parts have to be purchased from other retailers and assembled separately.

Yes, Woodbury does know that tilting against industrial windmills has a poor reputation. Nonetheless, he is trying to change our picture of the automobile.

"People think I'm crazy," Woodbury concedes, "until I explain this to them. Basically, we're all hauling around four extra seats with us."

His epiphany about narrow cars came to him while being stuck in Los Angeles traffic.

"The space waste is unthinkable," Woodbury says. "It's insane."

A child of the '60s who grew up in Haight-Ashbury (yes, he was there for the Summer of Love), Woodbury has been fond of tinkering with machinery since he was a boy. His dad, an IBM engineer who helped create the computer industry, brought home miscellaneous parts for Woodbury's enjoyment.

"My best class in high school was machine shop," he says.

Woodbury boasts an eclectic business résumé that includes, in no particular order, working in the real estate industry, racing Porsches, publishing books about Tibetan culture, selling cars, ironworking and founding three companies. Despite his lack of automotive industry experience, Woodbury remains convinced the Tango will succeed.

"I think I have the best chance of building a revolutionary car," he says. "Why else mess with something that hasn't changed for more than a century?"

Zooming Around the Web: John SanGiovanni (co-founder, ZenZui)

Microsoft-backed mobile phone browser ZenZui has seen its share of national accolades, but few were greater than the one given to company co-founder John SanGiovanni by the WSA last May. At a forum held by the technology trade organization, SanGiovanni received the "Best and Brightest" and "Best Sales Pitch" award following his enthusiastic presentation.

SanGiovanni's eight years of experience as a mobile interface designer, program manager and "technical evangelist" at Microsoft Research helped him create ZenZui's "zooming user interface"—a grid of 16 customizable, interactive web access "tiles" for use on all Windows Media mobile phones. Revenues for ZenZui are generated each time an advertiser-sponsored tile is selected by the touch screen or whenever a transaction takes place.

Last fall, the independent company closed Series A financing of \$12 million from Oak Investment Partners and Hunt Ventures. The company concluded its alpha trial this spring, with plans for a beta version this fall. ZenZui is also evaluating the open-source BREW platform as one of its new wireless software applications for 2008.

Making Data Talk: Christian Chabot (CEO, Tableau Software)

Databases are among the marvels of the modern world. But as more data gets added, the cells multiply like a lottery winner's friends, making the information difficult to decipher. Enter Tableau Software.

With Tableau, "I can point it to a database or spreadsheet," says CEO Christian Chabot, "and crack it open so that I can see the patterns and trends and outliers and correlations in summary."

Chabot's team includes two of his fellow alumni from Stanford University, where the idea for Tableau first germinated: Pat Hanrahan, chief technology officer and a computer-graphics genius who helped found Pixar Studios, and database query expert Chris Stolte.

"We're a company that's born from the marriage of two strange bedfellows," says Chabot, a former venture capitalist and digital-route mapping pioneer. "One is the computer graphics community. The other bedfellow is database query experts."

In August, the company's Tableau Professional visual analysis software won the Editor's Choice Award from SQL Server magazine.

For Voice Recognition, Press 1... Mike Kennewick (co-founder, VoiceBox Technologies)

What seems like common sense to people does not, alas, always translate sensibly to computers—especially in the field of voice recognition. Ever had to repeat something four times over the phone for your bank's seemingly dimwitted automated teller? According to a Bellevue company called VoiceBox, the answer to the problem is context.

"Our approach is to mimic what people do," explains co-founder Mike Kennewick. His brother, Bob, had designed a software program that approached voice recognition semantically, instead of using the keyword-recognition principle found in most existing systems. The latter are notoriously unable to filter background noise, to parse accents or hesitations, and to detect keywords amid other words that the systems are not programmed to recognize.

When asked by his brother what practical application could be made of his new software, Mike Kennewick—a former Microsoft executive and founder of document management company, Saros Corp.—came up with mobile search. Typing is unsafe while driving, Kennewick said, making most online interfaces unavailable in transit. But what if you could simply ask your car's search device to find you the nearest theater showing "Casablanca"?

"In essence, we've added a cognitive process to voice recognition," Kennewick explains. "Just like human beings do."

Tapping into the Collective: Ben Elowitz (founder and CEO, Wetpaint.com)

Bad news rarely leads to something good. But bad news helped bring about the interactive information-sharing site, Wetpaint.com, one of the more intriguing Seattle startups in the so-called "Web 2.0" arena.

After helping found internet diamond retailer Blue Nile, and then helping fitness equipment maker Precor expand its market, Ben Elowitz was casting about for a way to introduce democracy to the internet. At the same time, a friend of his was diagnosed with a form of cancer called multiple myeloma. As Elowitz and a small circle of tech-savvy buddies helped their stricken friend search for practical information and post it online, they came to realize that they were creating a "wiki"—a user-made knowledge page. Why not use that approach as the foundation for a startup?

"Blogs are fine, but there has to be a better way for people to connect," says Elowitz, who considers the internet an experiential, rather than a static, tool. The name Wetpaint, he adds, alludes to our collective urge to touch a surface that says "wet paint" out of curiosity—to experiment with boundaries. After two years, the site now has more than 500,000 wikis. "It's all about the experience," he says. "I want to help make a difference in people's lives."

Power Worth Waiting For: Maury White (principal founder, chief technology officer, Infinia)

Perseverance is a much-admired human quality. "Never give in," Winston Churchill's oft-quoted speech advises. But for 42 years?

That's how long Maury White has hitched his professional star to free-piston Stirling engines. Never heard of them? That's because, until recently, these venerable power-generating devices, first invented in 1816, had found very few practical applications. The machines produce power efficiently via a rapid exchange of hot and cool gases inside a closed cylinder. The energy source comes from outside the cylinder rather than within, as in internal combustion. A free-piston Stirling is exactly what it sounds like, one in which the piston that produces power is not attached to other conventional engine parts, such as crank mechanisms, therefore creating less friction.

These energy conversion devices, however, pose high manufacturing costs because they are hand-built, one at a time, White says. Nonetheless, the former McDonnell Douglas and University of Washington physicist and engineer believed in the engines and in the improvements he helped make in their design. White helped form a company, now called Infinia, to produce them more than 20 years ago. He hoped to create an internal power source for artificial hearts, but for most of that time, the company struggled.

"There were a couple of occasions in the early years that we were literally hours from bankruptcy," White recalls.

The company is currently developing solar-electric generators for terrestrial use and developing other devices that will augment on-demand home water heating. Infinia also recently completed a partnership agreement with NASA to delivered more than 20 radio-isotope Stirling power generators for use in space. White has drawn venture financing from Paul Allen's Vulcan Inc. because several of Infinia's projects will enhance energy efficiency and conserve natural resources.

"This is by far the best time in my career—here at the end of it," says White, now chief technology officer at Infinia. "Some people might call it persistence. In reality, it's just as much stubbornness. I'm just glad to reach the point [at which] this can make a significant

contribution to the world we live in. Sometimes when things look worst, there's a reason we need to persist."

2007's Best-Laid Business Plans

Finding the "eureka" moment of discovering a great idea may not be teachable, but since the 1970s, the University of Washington has been doing its best to get future entrepreneurs as close as possible to that point. The UW's Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (CIE) holds an annual Business Plan Competition for the region's best startup ideas, with cash prizes awarded by co-sponsors such as RealNetworks, the Herbert B. Jones Foundation, DLA Piper, OVP Venture Partners, Summit Law Group and Talking Rain. Here is a selection of some CIE award standouts, who we'll probably be hearing more about in the near future:

IndEx-Agri Exchange of India, Winner, \$25,000 Grand Prize

This international networking service connects thousands of village merchants with retailers throughout India using text messaging. Team member Shamus Johnson, a Ph.D. candidate in the College of Education's ED Tech program, says the company's database will automatically connect buyers with sellers, cutting out the middlemen.

Gravity Payments, Winner, \$10,000 Second Place Prize

Even while he pursues his undergraduate degree, Seattle Pacific University senior Dan Price has built a billion-dollar company that processes debit and credit card charges for merchants owning small businesses in half a dozen metropolitan markets. Price says his company has grown by about 100 percent a year over the last four years. He also says his customer-retention rate is five times longer than the industry average because he charges a third to half of his competitors' rates and provides personalized service.

Bioleco, Winner, \$5,000 Finalist Prize

A UW team created this startup that combines current technologies and new science to grow algae for biodiesel, ethanol and other products.

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