

At Helsinki's Slush, start-ups 'speed date' for financing

November 23 2012, by Pauline Curtet

It's 10:00 am at Helsinki's Cable Factory and for Yan Shtefanets, a 23-year-old Russian student, the clock is ticking: he has two minutes to pitch his start-up to investors to secure much-needed financing.

The Slush start-up conference brought together hundreds of investors and start-ups from northern Europe over the course of two days Wednesday and Thursday, to take part in the technology sector's equivalent of the talent show X-Factor.

For his 120-second presentation, Shtefanets stands on a small podium to present his business plan to three judges who are either tech investors or job coaches.

"My smartphone app allows its users to locate cool events, close to their place," he explains, his eyes scanning the jury and the rest of the room jam-packed with a hundred investors, journalists and other entrepreneurs waiting their turn to present.

Tuomas Kosonen, a jury member and partner at the Finnish venture capital group Inventure, fires off his questions: "What's a cool event? Where's the money?"

Flustered, Shtefanets loses his cool and stumbles through his answers, and his two minutes are up. He doesn't find out immediately if he will proceed to the next round, but he can tell by the judges' faces that they weren't impressed and he leaves the podium, dejected.

Just like on reality television, the judges can be ruthless.

"When you decide to come and present your project on a stage, rehearse before! I didn't understand anything," thunders Finnish investor and judge Aape Pohjavirta at one entrepreneur.

At the Cable Factory, Helsinki's main cultural centre, investors in snazzy suits rub shoulders with budding tech entrepreneurs clad in their standard uniform, hoodies.

Slush is divided into three categories, borrowing terms from the boxing ring: lightweight, middleweight and heavyweight, with elimination rounds for each.

The start-ups are also divided by number of employees (six, 20 or 50 people) and their financing needs (100,000 euros, 500,000 euros or 10 million euros).

For Shtefanets, who is a "lightweight" and who arrived the same morning after an exhausting bus trip from Saint Petersburg, the event ends in disappointment.

"I should have prepared more. Two minutes, it's really short," he says.

Of the 100 candidates in his division, only three finalists will secure [financing](#).

Throughout the day, the hopefuls take turns at the podium. Several have come up with the same idea: to use a smartphone to find the best beer in a given city.

Bored, the judges yawn at some of the presentations, before bursting suddenly with enthusiasm.

ShareTribe, an application that allows a community to share items privately, wins applause from the judges.

"We're looking for outgoing people, who can sell their product with simplicity," explains Maria Sipila, a job coach serving as one of the judges.

At 4:00 pm, after some 60 entrepreneurs have already pitched their ideas, Florent Quinti walks up to the podium.

The co-founder of a French start-up, Oleapark, he stands out and draws attention with his strong French accent. His application enables users of social media networks to locate contacts they want to meet in large crowds, such as a large conference.

But in the end, he's eliminated.

"It's okay. I've taken part in a lot of events like this in other countries. The goal is to get known," he says.

Kalle Maeaettae, a 30-year-old Finn whose business Fluid Interaction is in the middleweight category, agrees.

"My strategy with the investors is to entertain them, to make them laugh," he says.

"If the guy spent a good moment with me, he'll remember and he'll say, 'I didn't understand his project but I could meet him again'," he says.

Maeaettae's application Twheel makes it possible to modify how information is presented on micro-blogging site Twitter.

For those who didn't make it to the final round, there's always another

chance.

"Come back next year, try your luck again. Don't give up!," insists judge Sipila.

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Citation: At Helsinki's Slush, start-ups 'speed date' for financing (2012, November 23) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-11-helsinki-slush-start-ups-date.html>

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