

Past winners ride out recession, grow businesses

BY NANCY DAHLBERG

Special to The Miami Herald

Sometimes winning the Business Plan Challenge is just the first step in an entrepreneurial journey.

Take Baby Abuelita, for example. The team behind the singing Hispanic dolls won second place in 2005.

Since then, the product family that started with grandparent dolls that croon lullabies in Spanish now has four babies. Baby Javier, the first boy toddler doll, came out last year after numerous customer requests and was one of the best sellers during the holiday season, said co-founder and CEO Carol Fenster.

One area of growth for the company is the education market. Baby Abuelita dolls and their story were featured in a 2010-2011 Houghten Mifflin Harcourt 3rd grade math textbook for the State of Florida.

In addition, Baby Abuelita self-produced two direct-to-home animated DVDs that feature its characters in episodes that are designed to educate on a variety of topics as well as entertain and further preserve traditional musical culture. In the coming year, it hopes to add a major media partner that will allow the company to leverage the animated content it has created to further build the brand and drive product sales, Fenster said.

Future growth plans include creating other ethnic versions of the grandparent dolls as well as the production of a children's television series based on the Baby Abuelita characters, Fenster said.

Baby Abuelita was a presenting company at Florida International University's Americas Venture Capital Conference last fall, and won its FedEx Access to Global Markets Prize, \$10,000 in in-kind services.

"Like all small businesses, Baby Abuelita has faced significant challenges over the last two years in particular," Fenster said. "But I am happy to report that we have weathered the storm and we are moving full steam ahead in growing our company."

JUST ASK BOO

A more recent winner was Just Ask Boo, an online grapevine launched during the Great Recession. It won third place and the People's Pick in 2009, and has taken off since.

Just Ask Boo in Miami-Dade, which has more than 10,000 subscribers, now has sister newsletters and websites in Broward, Palm Beach and Orlando and will be launching in several more markets this year, said Boo Zamek, founder and president of Just Ask Boo.

The economy has been especially tough for advertising-dependent businesses like Zamek's. But Just Ask Boo, now with a team of 10, raised its first round of investor capital, she said, and launched a free events calendar (www.jabcal.com) and JAB Wine + Dine, a special edition that features restaurants and wine stores.

Another addition in the last year has been The JustASK Campaign, where a panel of judges chooses someone from the community who has been through tremendous adversity, but is going back to school. "We register the candidate at Target and our readers purchase the items on the registry in order to give the candidate a jump start toward their journey toward excellence," Zamek said.

FLASH-ME

Jake Nolan won the high school track in 2009 for his plan for Flash-ME, an application for flash-card style study on the go.

Now a freshman at Syracuse University, Nolan is pursuing a triple major — Entrepreneurship, Marketing and Supply Chain — but still finds time for his many entrepreneurial ventures.

Flash-Me is being redeveloped by business partner Maruika Wei. But its sister website, SnapStudy.net, is doing well, Nolan said. SnapStudy allowing users to create flash-cards on the Web for free and either sync them with their iPhones or study via SnapStudy's online application.

Nolan also started a consulting service (NolanToday.com) and is a partner in ThePhace.com. But his primary venture is called Social Magazine with fellow student Harley Dalton.

Social Magazine is geared toward bringing campus communities closer. The team plans to launch the first magazine, called SU Social, at Syracuse and then expand to other universities. Each campus would have its own specific version, featuring just that school, Nolan said. The monthly magazine would be free; they envision revenues from advertising.

"Think of the magazine as People Magazine, but instead of featuring celebrities, it features students — what they are wearing, who they are with, where they are going, what's hot, what's not, what frats are throwing the best parties, etc.," he said.

If you were a past winner or finalist of the Business Plan Challenge, let us know how you are doing. Email businesschallenge@MiamiHerald.com