

Two Wichitans to participate in Kansas Pipeline, a yearlong entrepreneurship program

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The two Wichitans picked last week to participate in the Pipeline entrepreneurship grooming program are young but experienced leaders who are pursuing ventures that are months old.

Mark Allen, 42, president and founder of Enertech, and Brandon Shuey, 37, president and founder of FlipHound.com, are the latest crop of entrepreneurs from Wichita for the year-long entrepreneur fellowship.

But unlike the past eight Wichita entrepreneurs who preceded them, Allen and Shuey will be part of the program's first class to include entrepreneurs from Nebraska and Missouri. Over the next year, Allen and Shuey will delve into topics such as market validation and financing with 10 other entrepreneurs from cities such as Omaha, Kansas City and St. Louis.

They'll also become part of a statewide and nationwide network of fellow entrepreneurs, venture capitalists and academics.

Joni Cobb, president of Pipeline, said it was Allen's and Shuey's enthusiasm for their companies that made them stand out as Pipeline candidates.

"They both seem incredibly passionate," she said.

Pipeline compliance

Allen didn't set out to be a high-tech entrepreneur.

Working as a marketer, the Friends University graduate wanted to find out how to marry marketing data with geographic information systems.

That led Allen and three others to create a company that helped retailers know their customers through GIS. That company morphed into Paradigm, which is in the same industry that Allen's startup company competes.

It's an industry that Allen calls public awareness compliance programs. Specifically, Allen's company helps pipeline companies – those that transport natural gas or hazardous liquids – comply with a set of federal regulations.

Those regulations call for pipeline companies to make homes and businesses near a pipeline transporting such liquids aware of their existence, and provide them with pipeline companies' contact information and other education.

"Generally it's to help raise awareness of pipelines in communities and how to interact (with pipeline companies)," he said.

Allen said his company uses a technology that it has developed to provide a service that is different from its competitors.

“In the next five years I believe we will have a substantial market share,” Allen said, quantifying that a realistic goal would be 15 to 25 percent market share in the U.S.

#### Access to billboards

Shuey was several months into opening Atomic Enterprises with partner Mike Snyder when the idea for FlipHound.com emerged.

He and Snyder were having a cup of coffee one afternoon when they began discussing a way to allow small-business owners access to digital billboards without any lengthy and expensive contracts. FlipHound also allows those customers to upload their own content for display on the billboard.

FlipHound will do that by negotiating deals with digital billboard owners. It will make its money through a sales commission it gets when a company buys time on a billboard through FlipHound. It already has access to a few digital billboards that Atomic Enterprises operates, he said.

Before FlipHound and Atomic Enterprises, Shuey was CEO of Key Centrix, a health care software company. He has an electrical engineering degree from the University of Kansas.

#### Joining Pipeline

Shuey said it was Brian Williamson, CEO of JCB Labs and a 2011 Pipeline innovator, who encouraged Shuey to apply for the program. The two have known each other dating back to Shuey’s work at Key Centrix.

“Just knowing Brandon, he’s got a very entrepreneurial spirit so I knew this was for him,” Williamson said. “I think he’ll be a great contributor.”

Allen said Trish Brasted, CEO of Wichita Technology Corp., encouraged him to apply.

Brasted said both Allen and Shuey’s experience with earlier ventures make them a good fit for the program because they have lessons they can share with some of the less-experienced innovators.

“I think as far as starting and growing companies, they probably top the list of experience in that regard,” Brasted said.

Allen said he hopes the next year will give him the ability “to take the time to strategically stand back from my company and look from the outside in.” He also hopes the program will give him some ideas for industries other than pipeline companies to pursue to diversify his company’s business.

Shuey said he wants the Pipeline experience to “accelerate my business” and maybe avoid some mistakes he would otherwise make without participating in the program. There will be plenty of people to bounce ideas off of, he said, including 11 other entrepreneurs who are in the same situation he is.

“It’s like having 12 chefs in the kitchen ... but we’re helping each other,” Shuey said. “That camaraderie is immeasurable.”