

Below the Radar Program in Chicago to Thrust Innovation into the Limelight

The mission of *Critical Mess* is to offer stimulating, business-building ideas to aspiring technology entrepreneurs from experienced, successful entrepreneurs who understand that it's ultimately about your ability to build a world-class business and not your world-class technology. *Critical Mess* suggests that entrepreneurship is not a clean, by-the-numbers activity but an effort to be mostly right most of the time.

CHICAGO – If an important innovation fell in a forest with no one there to hear it, would it make a sound? If no one hears about an innovation, would it still be important?

Ensuring that people hear about important innovations is the goal of a new program from the Chicago chapter of the MIT Enterprise Forum (MITEF). MIT, which is recognized worldwide for its passion for innovation, has 34 forum chapters across the U.S. Even so, it's the Chicago chapter that's spearheading this new program.¹

The program is Below the Radar[®] and its purpose is to recognize outstanding examples of innovation – by individuals, companies, educational and research institutions as well as government agencies – that have gone largely unnoticed by the business community. While the focus of the program is innovation in the Chicago area, it is expected that this will expand geographically over time.

Below the Radar sets a standard for measuring “innovation” by requiring that an innovation be causing – or have the clear potential to cause – significant economic impact through its introduction or use. By this standard, a variety of otherwise worthy activities are considered to *not* be innovation including creativity, ideation, incremental cost reduction or efficiency improvements and new variations of existing products.

In other words, an innovation must cause a *significant* change in the marketplace. Below the Radar recognizes five distinct types of innovation. Some are familiar and some aren't. They include:

1. **Business model:** the way business is conducted to generate value for a firm and its customers. Familiar examples would be Southwest Airlines, eBay and Dell.
2. **Technology:** the application of science to solve human problems. Familiar examples include wireless telephony, recombinant DNA and nanotechnology.
3. **Product/Service:** new ways of solving problems. Familiar examples include the first Apple computer, BlackBerry, Federal Express and eBay.
4. **Innovation management:** the process and environment within which innovation is inspired, fostered, nurtured, recognized and commercialized. Familiar firms that consistently deliver innovative products include Intel, 3M, IBM and Johnson & Johnson.
5. **Design:** the visual structure, organization and appearance of a product or service. Familiar examples include the Walkman, iPod, iMac and RAZR cell phone.

As currently structured, Below the Radar announces on a quarterly basis a list of finalists whose innovations merit recognition. The top innovators from among the quarterly finalists are then announced at an annual awards event that will be inaugurated in 2007. While nominations can come from anyone, the selection of finalists is done by an independent panel of distinguished and innovation-savvy judges.

There is no fixed number of quarterly or annual finalists in any of the five categories, and if there are no worthy nominees, a category might not have any finalists.

The four² Chicago-area finalist companies chosen for the second quarter of 2006 include the following firms:

1. **Business model innovation:** R3 Systems Group; Carol Stream; Tom Kunkel, Managing Partner
2. **Technology innovation:** VasSol; Chicago; Anthony Curcio, CEO
3. **Product/Service innovation:** Solvent Systems; Elk Grove Village; Steve Rundell, CEO
4. **Design innovation:** Rightfield Solutions; Chicago; Jordon Dolin, CEO

For those of us in the Midwest technology community, MITEF's Below the Radar program can be a great opportunity to ensure that important innovations get the recognition they deserve. In addition, it can also be a great way to make your own voice heard. Here are a few suggestions that might help your favorites to make the finalist cut:

1. Remember that the innovation must be causing or have the clear potential to cause significant economic impact through its introduction or use. To that end, ask yourself whether the product or service is a "must have" for its target customer or if it's merely nice to have. Ask yourself how the innovation's marketplace impact is measured and why it is potentially significant.
2. Think carefully about innovations you might know about in each of the five different categories. Most people naturally think first about the product or service category and never get beyond that.
3. In your nomination submission, provide important, relevant and specific information about the innovation to help the judges make their selections. Providing minimal information or just doing a core dump from a Web site doesn't help.
4. It's easy to nominate a client as a way to ingratiate yourself. That's quite all right if the client is worthy. Also, don't be shy about nominating yourself, your company or your best supplier if they are also truly worthy.
5. In the Chicago tradition, vote early and often. As the nomination process is open again, get started as soon as you want.

By the way, if you're an entrepreneur whose venture is not quite ready for Below the Radar, you have something else to look forward to. In conjunction with RPX Group, MITEF will be launching an initiative known as the Whiteboard Innovation Challenge that is likely to be of keen interest to technology ventures at every stage of development. Stay tuned.

¹ You might like to know that your humble columnist is on the board of the Chicago chapter of MITEF and is the new director of the Below the Radar program.

² There was no finalist chosen this quarter for the innovation management category.

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