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It's the Branding, Stupid!

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Imagine a flash of genius striking you for a new business idea. Daydreaming about the grand plans you have for your new project, you soon realize that a multitude of problems and roadblocks explode to life that may stop you dead in your tracks – zero start-up capital, no business plan and a lack of suitable teammates. Starting a new business is never easy. But even when these more immediate problems are overcome, it is the more long-term construction of a recognizable brand that determines whether an idea will eventually make the leap into a successful business. Five of the winners of the '2012 Startups 100 Competition' came to Oxford on Monday, November 15, to talk about the challenges of building their brands. They shared their insights with an audience of about a hundred members of the Oxford Entrepreneurs, Europe's largest student society promoting entrepreneurship. Three key lessons can be learned from their stories that every entrepreneur (in the making) should heed.

Lesson #1: Couple the desirable with the necessary

Donnie MacLean, founder of EatBalanced, developed the first nutritionally balanced pizza in co-operation with a Professor of human nutrition. Pizza and healthy living – doesn't sound very compatible? Donnie's idea to make tasty pizzas that contains all the main nutrients you need in one meal stems from his dissatisfaction with the common belief that great taste means opting for a guilty pleasure. His wonder-pizza earned him the 'Best New Idea' award in the UK and allowed him to close deals with two of the "big four" supermarkets. Eureka!

Similarly, Kate Finch's idea for 'Junior's Pantry' also grew out dissatisfaction. As a City Director and busy working mum she found herself in the situation of not always having enough time to cook for her children but still wanting them to eat a balanced diet. 'Junior's Pantry' produces one-pot meals that make it easy for working parents, single mums and single dads to provide a simple, healthy meal for their kids. The stories of Donnie and Kate show that successful branding starts with having a 'hook' – a unique value proposition. The point is to stop being like everyone else. You need to be unique and carve out your own niche in the market.

Lesson #2: Create and be courageous

Being unique is also about ownership. Adam Solimon's CharBrew, a tea business, was founded based on this belief. When competition is fierce, as it is in the tea industry with big names such as Twinings dominating the scene, one has to be an innovator and a risk-taker in one. Adam thus decided to create the tea recipes himself and add more 'cheerful' flavors such as Strawberry and Cream or Tropical Rooibos that set CharBrew apart from traditional English tea companies. According to Adam, visualizing your customer's profile and lifestyle really helps focus your brand-building efforts. His strategy has paid off. CharBrew tea is being sold in 408 Sainsbury's stores and other supermarkets and hotels so far. After two years in business, the company's turnover last year was £110,000 and is expected to triple for 2012. Creating your own product from scratch and pushing the boundaries of traditional products is the way to go.

Lesson #3: Love what you do and spread the love

Loving what you do may seem like an odd piece of advice to give. After all, it should be the reason for starting your own business in the first place. However, Alok Mathur, founder of Soul Tree Wines, knows that believing in your business idea is what keeps you on track in stormy times. His startup specializes in the production of Indian wines for UK restaurants. The only problem: India isn't a place known for wine. His mission has been to change the status quo and make Indian wine mainstream. Whilst some might dismiss the idea as being unrealistic given the resistant and conservative nature of the wine market, his results paint a different picture: Since the company's launch last year, there are now nearly 300 Indian restaurants listing the wine, with 20-25 being added each month.

The case of Tom Callard, founder of Love Da Pop, shows that spreading the enthusiasm for your brand idea is equally important to succeed. Presenting his candy-striped paper bags of home-baked, flavored popcorn, Tom and his two co-founders initially lacked a solid business plan and had a tough time getting the business started. But entrepreneurial spirit goes deep. The three founders distributed free tasters at festivals to promote their popcorn. Their drive to turn their product into a fun brand that comes along with a pinch of chaotic creativity eventually prompted British entrepreneur Peter Jones to invest £70,000. The new Love Da Pop range is now about to launch in Waitrose and Tom and his teammates are looking into extending the brand. Both startup stories make a compelling case for entrepreneurial persistence. Building a brand is about being like a roly-poly doll – heavy on the bottom and bouncing back when tipped over.

People don't have relationships with products; they are loyal to brands. Building a successful brand is a challenge and certainly not the only factor that makes or breaks a new business. But without having a 'hook' and enough courage and persistence it is difficult to turn a product into a successful brand.