

Entrepreneurial Ambassadors

Startup Team Takes Message to National Stage

If one were to dramatically simplify what it takes to create a successful entrepreneurial community, three items on the list might look like this:

1. Provide the resources – financial and otherwise – to help businesses start and grow
2. Experience success at the company and individual level
3. Tell your story

Five Indiana entrepreneurs, representing Startup Indiana, focused on Step 3 earlier this year during an event that included a visit to the White House. *BizVoice*® spoke to three members of that contingent – Kevin Hitchen, Matt Hunckler and Dustin Sapp. Also part of the team were Michael Coffey, a partner in DeveloperTown, and Mike Langellier, CEO of TechPoint.

One-third of the team members at TinderBox are current or former participants in the Orr Entrepreneurial Fellowship program.



Matt Hunckler helped take Verge from a few friends to engaging more than 2,200 entrepreneurs, investors, software developers and more in Indiana and beyond.

The group's message in Washington and today: Great things are taking place in our state, others are taking notice and we (as in all Hoosiers) need to continue working together to craft the next chapters of this still-developing tale.

Lessons learned

Startup Indiana was one of 11 states/regions represented at the event. The Startup America Partnership, launched by the Obama administration in early 2011 with the guidance of the Case and Kauffman foundations, is focused on creating successful networks for young, high-growth companies to thrive. Among the White House participants were U.S. Chief Technology Officer Todd Park, Small Business Administration chief Karen Mills and Steve Case, AOL co-founder and chairman of the partnership.

“Not everybody gets to say that they were in the White House,” says Sapp, president and co-founder of TinderBox. “Being welcomed and being asked to share insights, there is a lot of pride that takes place. There is just an energy that gets created out of that.”

Some of that energy was supplied by the Indiana team.

Hitchen, one of the founders of Localstake (a marketplace that allows individuals to invest in local private businesses), notes, “After we spoke with a lot of the leaders from different states, we realized we’re pretty well down the path of having a well-organized start-up community, one that is really focused on supporting each other. One of the things I got out of it is we’re doing a lot of things right ... in terms of trying to nurture a start-up environment.”



Hunckler agrees. The founder of Verge (a growing network of software and technology entrepreneurs) and recent addition to the team at social engagement platform Social Reactor learned that “other regions are looking at what Indiana has done. The thing you start to realize is that it takes just one ‘crazy person,’ one person to go out on a limb, beat the drum, rally that next wave of people to follow in their footsteps.”

There are plenty of “crazies” in Indiana, Hunckler contends, citing the assistance he has received from professors, mentors (Scott Jones and Mark Hill among them) and others in his young business career. Others would tag him with that complimentary label for his efforts during his four years since graduating from Indiana University’s entrepreneurship program.

“When I moved to Indianapolis, I wanted to be around young people. Me and a couple of buddies started what is now Verge,” he recalls. “We all liked to spend our nights and weekends talking about and working on our businesses. That initial group of eight to 12 people has now grown to 2,200 people around the state. Software developers, entrepreneurs and investors – it’s a testimony to the people and the support system.”

Come on back

While learning about what is taking place across the country, the Indiana team also had a specific message it wanted to share.

“Frankly, we wanted to enlighten the folks in the room on what Indiana’s really like,” Sapp shares. There are certainly various well-deserved reputations in Indiana, including sports, “but what most people don’t realize is how much



The Startup Indiana team at the White House (from left): Kevin Hitchen, Dustin Sapp, Michael Coffey, Mike Langellier and Matt Hunckler.

technology innovation has taken place in Indianapolis. It’s not just a flyover city. There’s a lot of activity, a lot of innovation. That was our first big goal, to knock folks off their feet a little bit and make them realize that we have more going for us than most our size from the technology ecosystem standpoint.”

Part of that message is the importance of welcoming entrepreneurs back home to Indiana.

Sapp cites one of the big gaps today as “attracting and bringing in the more experienced senior talent to help you scale a company.” No pun intended, but Scale Computing (Jeff Ready started, built and sold several Silicon Valley companies before establishing an Indiana headquarters for Scale) is one example. “That’s not happening enough. People don’t have to stay on the West Coast or in the northeast to work on fun stuff. They can make a pretty big impact (here), be close to family, grow a family, have a good school system – those types of things.”

Hitchen envisions a Startup Indiana role for reconnecting with those who left after growing up or studying in the state. “Let’s make it easier for them to find jobs and get connected.”

All three talked about the tremendous value of the Orr Fellowship program, with Hunckler calling it the “model for young entrepreneurial talent.” Not only does it help keep young people in the state after graduation, he adds, but it delivers an important message for those in the “coming home” stage.

“There are a lot of opportunities now for starting and launching your career here in Indiana. At the same time, even if you move to the coast, you’ve been exposed to it and you know it’s here so when you’re ready to start a family, you remember the cost of living and the many resources – they’ll come back and start the next chapter of their career.”

In further testimony to the critical nature of the Orr program, Sapp says a third of his workforce is current or former fellows. He terms them the “cream of the crop.”

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Company Connections

- **Hitchen and Localstake** began their journey in late 2011. Much of 2012, he says, was spent getting regulatory items in line. On the day of this May interview, Localstake made its first external hire with the initial company seeking to raise capital scheduled for debut in June. Hitchen sees adding a business or two every month beyond that with a focus on Indiana organizations.
- **Hunckler** became a vice president of Social Reactor (a Scott Jones start-up) in January 2013. The company is an advertising platform that helps brands connect with the right audiences through relationships with leading social influencers. He has served as president of Verge since March 2010.
- **TinderBox** provides a web-based tool that streamlines processes for sales and marketing teams. Sapp says it has increased revenues every month since its January 2010 launch, with a very strong 2012. Additional financing was announced in early 2013, with plans for 95 additional jobs over the next four years.

White House

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Next steps

Hitchen says, “Indiana is really, really good at business-to-business companies (listing ExactTarget, Interactive Intelligence, Aprimo and more). Business to consumer, we haven’t had a huge history of successful businesses. We want to build on that b-to-b strength. We’re also focused on trying to make more connections for start-ups. While funding is important, customers are probably even more necessary.”

Sapp references the collaborative instead of cutthroat environment in Indianapolis and the state. “That has made this, in my opinion, one incredible place to start a business. I’m pretty passionate about that because when entrepreneurs help entrepreneurs, amazing things happen to everybody involved and you’re seeing that here.”

Hunckler: “We need to be part of the bigger conversation. I’m not just talking about regionally or nationally but

globally. I’d like Indiana to be a hub for a lot of the activities rather than a spoke to a New York or San Francisco. It’s an opportunity for Indiana to put ourselves at the center, not just geographically but also figuratively, at the epicenter of the broader conversation.”

Talking about his Startup Indiana teammates and other colleagues, Hunckler concludes: We’re all friends. ... We find chances to connect and help each other out. It’s the rising tide lifts all ships kind of mentality. It’s the people that make Indiana special.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Kevin Hitchen, Localstake, at <https://localstake.com>

Matt Hunckler, Social Reactor, at <http://socialreactor.com>

Dustin Sapp, TinderBox, at <http://gettinderbox.com>