

Who'll Give Your Business Money Right Now?

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NEW YORK ([MainStreet](#)) -- If you're a budding entrepreneur or you've got a growing small business but don't have the money to expand, getting into the competition circuit may be a good way to find capital.

There are a host of organizations offering legit money to small businesses. Some competitions are for start-ups, others for students. Still others just want to help the little guy.



A host of organizations are offering seed money to small start-ups.

Unfortunately, the number of applicants vying for the top prize at some of the biggest contests has spiked since the recession, meaning competition is strong as contest organizers look for bright, determined and resourceful competitors savvy in technology and social media.

Here's a few small-business contests that can get your great idea or business on the map.

1. Rice University Business Plan Competition

The [Rice University Business Plan Competition](#), a graduate-student-level competition, is taking applications for 2012.

Entering its 12th year, the competition, hosted by the Rice Alliance for Technology and Entrepreneurship and the Jesse H. Jones Graduate School of Business at Rice University, seeks to get collegiate entrepreneurs to fine-tune their business plans and funding pitches.

Forty-two semi-finalist teams will be decided in March and invited to the annual competition the following month to compete for \$1.3 million in prizes, including \$900,000 in seed money and more than \$500,000 in other cash prizes. Teams will be judged on how strong their business plans are and whether an investor would want in on their idea.

Of past competitors, 133 have gone on to launch businesses that are still in operation and raised in excess of \$397 million

in funding, according to the competition's Web site.

The annual competition is open only to students, but they do not have to be at Rice University. Teams must have at least one graduate student on the start-up's management team. Applications are due Feb. 17.

2. Chattanooga's "The Gig Prize"

Technology start-ups have a chance to win a [\\$100,000 "Gig Prize"](#) in this competition sponsored by **Alcatel-Lucent (ALU)** and the Chattanooga Chamber of Commerce.

The city of Chattanooga, Tenn., aka the Gig City, boasts that it has the fastest broadband network of any city in the U.S., and that it is able to provide it to all of its 170,000 homes and businesses. Chattanooga is putting the "finishing touches on the largest and most advanced Smart Grid in the nation and using its gig network to pioneer a model for what other cities could become when bandwidth is no barrier," according to the October release on the unveiling of the competition.

The goal of the competition is to "foster the development of gigabit-per-second Internet applications and business ventures" by looking for tech-savvy entrepreneurs who create next-generation Internet apps and businesses using Chattanooga's super-speedy Internet.

Contestants can submit applications starting on November 21 through the end of the year, the Chamber of Commerce says. Winners will be announced in August.

"Last year, Chattanooga became America's first and only city to complete a communitywide network capable of delivering up to 1 gigabit-per-second Internet speeds to every home and business in EPB's 600-square-mile service area," says Robert Vrij, president of Alcatel-Lucent's Americas Region. "We're proud to partner with Chattanooga as this extraordinary city establishes a groundbreaking model for demonstrating the direct linkage between investment in telecommunications infrastructure and economic growth."

3. Love a Local Business

Intuit's (INTU) [Love a Local Business](#) has already awarded \$800,000 to small businesses that have received the most support from their community but need to [grow and hire](#), the company says.

Each month, Intuit awards three \$25,000 grants to small businesses who are most nominated and voted for online by their fans: customers, friends, family members, employees and owners. The winners are put into a pool for quarterly winners of up to \$50,000.

Nominees do not have to be Intuit customers, the company says.

4. Brewing the American Dream.

Sam Adams' founder wants to help small businesses in the food, beverage and hospitality industries. Koch, who considers himself a brewer above all else, says he wants to give other emerging businesses the opportunities he didn't have when building his empire.

Koch launched the [Brewing the American Dream](#) program, a micro-lending program, with Accion in New England 2008. This past spring he expanded the program to New York City, Cincinnati and Lehigh Valley, Pa. Most recently Brewing the American Dream has expanded to Chicago, and there are plans in the works for further expansion across the U.S. in 2012.

Sam Adams plans to lend up to \$250,000 to New York City businesses this year.

5. Gwinnett Innovation Park Founders Grant and Nspire Program

Intelligent Systems (INS) Chairman and CEO Leland Strange, a serial entrepreneur and investor, is supporting local tech entrepreneurs through the [Gwinnett Innovation Park Founders Grant and Nspire Program](#).

The incubation program is looking to support Atlanta-based tech entrepreneurs by providing them with resources such as free office space for a year, access to executives, including successful entrepreneurs, and monthly marketing and PR advice sessions.

Tech companies that are part of the Nspire program are eligible for the Founders Grant for stipends of \$25,000 awarded each quarter next year. Since the launch of the program in August, the program has had eight new technology companies move in.

Got a contest or grant program for small businesses? Email me: Laurie.Kulikowski@thestreet.com. We'll keep a running tab of organizations giving money to small businesses.

-- Written by Laurie Kulikowski in New York.

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