

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

by Christine Jindra

For a lot of small business owners, a little money can go a long way, especially in the early stages of their companies' development. COSE's annual Business Pitch Competition provides a total of \$40,000 in prize money for business owners to take their business from start-up to established small business.

In the following profiles, winners talk about how the competition helped them achieve greater sales, enabled them to add more employees and changed their business operations.



Entrepreneurial Spirits

Founder: Kevin Suttman

Former life: Sales exec for an international company

Start-up: Seven Brothers Distilling Company, 2011

Product: Vodka, rum, gin, whiskey, infused liquors

Tag line: World-class liquors made in Ohio

Growth: Added gin, whiskey, private-label liquors and retail sales

COSE: \$20,000 first-place winner, 2012

Website: www.seven-brothers.com

It's been rapid growth for Kevin Suttman of Seven Brothers Distilling Company since 2012 when he won the \$20,000 first-place COSE Business Pitch Competition award.

After winning the competition, Suttman built a new still and tasting room at his Lake County microbrewery. He added gin, Ohio wheat whiskey and several flavor-infused vodkas to his original line of vodka and two rums. He also started private label production (now up to nine liquors for three companies) and expanded Seven Brothers' distribution by three states.

The microbrew began monthly tastings and formulated new, infused liquors — a complicated process that needs federal approval for formulas and labels. Today, Seven Brothers has a dozen infusions approved or in development.

Suttman is also planning to move his distillery from a 1,000-square-foot building in LeRoy Township to one twice its size. The move, near the end of May, means he can hold two tastings a month and roll out new flavors of liquor.

"I'm excited," he said. "The new building is more on the Ohio winery and Ohio wine tourism trail and should do well."

So, what makes Seven Brothers' process unique? Suttman uses a vacuum distilling process he developed to infuse flavors such as cinnamon and espresso into vodka and other liquors.

"I distill under vacuum, which lowers the boiling point," he said. "I can pull out flavors that others can't. Distilling this way is a lot more time-consuming, but the results are worth it."

Until eight months ago, Seven Brothers liquors were sold only at Ohio state stores (Vodka is \$33.10; Erie Island Silver Rum is \$25.80) and now distribution has been added to Indiana, Illinois and Georgia. Suttman sells his gin exclusively out of state, to test the waters. "Our gin is great and gin is an up-and-coming liquor," he stated.

Now Suttman, once a one man operation (with help from his wife and children), is hiring. First he plans on adding staff for the new tasting room and then managers as he begins to turn over some responsibilities to concentrate on his core business. An independent sales woman is introducing Seven Brothers into more bars and restaurants to help grow his brand recognition.

"With the move, I've been developing a new organizational structure with new roles and, little by little, will start adding people," he said. "We are always working on new products, equipment and techniques so that we can bring new flavors to our customers."