

CommNexus program brings companies together

By DOUG SHERWIN, The Daily Transcript

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CommNexus tries to stay on the leading edge when it comes to helping fledgling San Diego communication companies grow and flourish.

For its latest project, the nonprofit organization has taken a page from eHarmony.com.

Terming it a form of "high tech speed dating," CommNexus has created a program in which local startups can secure a private audience with some of the giants in the communications industry in the hopes of forming a long-lasting partnership.

Since 2007, CommNexus has held 10 events in the program, called MarketLink, bringing in officials from companies like Ericsson, LG Electronics, Nokia, Samsung and Motorola.

"Essentially they have felt the program gave them exposure to companies and technology that would have been more difficult to find on their own," said Rory Moore, chief executive officer of CommNexus. "They viewed CommNexus as a real search engine, in a way, for these companies.

"It provides a high value for large companies, but also for small companies that are looking for strategic partners that are hard to get."

Each MarketLink event is promoted to the approximately 8,000 tech sector professionals in the CommNexus database.

The host company then selects up to 18 finalists to meet in person. The meetings take place over a two-day period and typically last about 50 minutes, during which the nascent company makes its pitch.

Any follow up conversations -- and even partnerships -- are up to the individual companies; the host organization isn't necessarily limited to picking one "winner."

"It's a win-win for all concerned," said Mintz, Levin, Cohn, Ferris, Glovsky and Popeo attorney Pedro Suarez, whose firm supplied the meeting space for a recent MarketLink event with Nokia. "They (the industry leaders) get access to technology and companies they might not otherwise see, and (smaller) companies get access to big players like Nokia, which is vital in this type of market."

MarketLink has produced a high rate of "second dates" with approximately 40-50 percent of companies continuing a dialogue with the host organization, according to Suarez.

The intellectual property attorney also has several clients who have participated in the MarketLink program and found it to be beneficial.

"As a firm, we are really committed to bringing together businesses with common interests and, more importantly, we do have a sweet spot for the small companies," Suarez said.

RaySpan, a four-year-old company that supplies components to cellular handsets, has used MarketLink to meet with six major players in the industry: Flextronics (Nasdaq: FLEX), Ericsson (Nasdaq: ERIC), Nokia (NYSE: NOK), Samsung, LG Electronics (Pink: LGEAF) and Motorola (NYSE: MOT).

"MarketLink was just a huge boost for us," said RaySpan CEO Franz Berkner. "It's led to meaningful relationships and serious dialogue with people we need to be talking to."

Berkner said simply being associated with San Diego and CommNexus lends serious credibility to his company.

"We're part of San Diego's great wireless community," he said. "That's another great message that CommNexus sends. We're the wireless capital of the universe, in our humble opinion, and this is our chance to show that."

HuTribe, which stands for human tribe, is another local startup that's made connections through MarketLink.

The company hopes to provide a service for people to manage their social networks, helping them stay in touch with the people they care the most about.

"MarketLink is an opportunity to meet with companies that might not otherwise return our calls," said Christophe Jouin, HuTribe CEO.

He also said the program has raised his company's visibility locally.

"I think it was a great experience because during the meetings we got good feedback on our application," he said of his session with Spain's Telefonica. "They know the market very well. They have access to more information (then we do) on product positioning. Then if we go to the next step and partner with them, that's fantastic."

Steve Tomlin, managing member of venture capital fund Avalon Ventures, also had high praise for the program.

"MarketLink's value-added agency approach in getting the technology behemoths together with the right local start-ups is a huge mutual benefit to all parties," he said in a testimonial to the program, "and the most useful program of its kind that I'm aware of in San Diego."