

An Overview of the ASU Technopolis Launch Pad Program: Accelerating new ventures

**By Dan O'Neill,
with Sharon C. Ballard and Jonathan Levie, PhD**

Introduction

It is very difficult for an entrepreneur or innovator to rapidly develop their idea into a feasible business plan and a compelling business story. While a lot of help is available to entrepreneurs, the quality of the help varies widely due to a lack of process, thinking tools, helper availability, process discipline and the venture's ability to pay for assistance.

The Launch Pad Program was created to address this need. Supported by ASU and the entrepreneurial community, and available at very low cost to new ventures, its purpose is to help entrepreneurs and innovators shape their opportunity through a business plan prototyping process.

Launch Pad is a disciplined, demanding process by which an entrepreneur or innovator can develop a compelling plan and story for his or her venture, resulting in a business plan presentation delivered to a panel of business experts who then give an hour of feedback and advice.

The Launch Pad is based upon the Supercoach® Entrepreneurial Training curriculum and is a globally unique process and tool set that is based on many years of successful coaching experience at UCSD CONNECT, the Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland, the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, the University of Kentucky's Entrepreneurial Coaches Institute, and at ASU. The exercises have been drawn from a wide range of sources. Some, such as the one page strategic action plan and technology roadmapping, come from the world of big business. Others come from leading new venture experts such as Rob Ryan. Most of them, however, were developed from scratch by Sharon Ballard when she began coaching first-time technology entrepreneurs as management fellow in the UCSD CONNECT Program ten years ago. We have been refining and adding to them ever since.

While our specialty is high potential start-ups in technology and life science industries, ASU Technopolis has successfully applied this process to a wide range of venture opportunities: high-tech and low-tech, small business and high potential start-up, urban and rural, local and global, for-profit and non-profit.

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Coaching Approach to Launch Pad

Launch Pad is based upon one of the most important forms of assistance to early stage entrepreneurs, that of facilitation or one-to-one coaching coupled with customized assistance for each venture. Research shows that interventions that provide customized vs. general assistance tend to be of much more value to entrepreneurs. ASU Technopolis coaches are not necessarily teachers, but more often are successful business people with some teaching or public presentation background. Our coaches have personal experience in operating a business or at least working in the business world.

What “coaching” mean in the context of Launch Pad? It is being supportive and encouraging, asking critical and tough questions and showing entrepreneurs how to find the answers to the questions they themselves need to ask. It is a peer-to-peer relationship, clarifying individual and community visions and directions; it is holistic, embracing the whole person and community. Coaching helps people set goals and deadlines. In the specific domain of entrepreneurship, it imparts a gift of skill in viable business creation that entrepreneurs can repeatedly use themselves and pass on to others.

Coaching Approach in Launch Pad

- **Hold entrepreneur accountable to what they say they want to accomplish**
- **Do not judge**
- **Point out inconsistencies**
- **Serve as coach, not expert advisor or consultant**

“I like Barnett Helzberg, Jr.’s approach to helping entrepreneurs, described in his article “Mentoring May Make the Difference” <http://www.entreworld.com/Content/TopAdvise.cfm?ColumnID=306>. He suggests three things for being a good mentor: listen, help through questions and connections to resources, and only provide an opinion when pressed for it.”

Sharon C. Ballard

Teaching, by contrast, imparts knowledge to the student in cases where the teacher is the expert and can answer questions and evaluate work. Nor must coaching be confused with forms of advising such as consulting, where experts retain the core skills themselves, or mentoring, where one uses one’s personal experience to suggest a specific solution to the mentee’s problem. Coaches can however act as resource facilitators by connecting entrepreneurs to others who can be of value to them. The Launch Pad Program draws on the community’s assets to address the unique needs that occur with each entrepreneur.

The coaches are taught to ask questions and to guide business-planning efforts by the entrepreneurs and to **offer specific advice only when asked!** The coaches are taught to avoid creating a dependency with the entrepreneurs. Rather, the coach provides ways of accessing the training, information and resources the entrepreneur requires for business planning and execution. A good coach holds the entrepreneur accountable to what the entrepreneur says he or she wants to accomplish and checks for consistencies using the one-to-one facilitation efforts.

Essence of a great business plan

The fundamental principle or theorem of the Launch Pad approach is that a Great Business Story is simply made of two things: a Big Opportunity and the answer to the question “Why are you the person/venture to realize this opportunity?”

Essence of a Great Business Story

- **A Big Opportunity**
 - **A story that creates a ‘greed’, ‘social mission’, and/or ‘green’ response(s)**
- **Answer to “Why you?”**
 - **Competitive Advantage/Distinctive Competence**
- **All Other Plan Sections Support These**
- **Set of Defensible Assertions**

The Big Opportunity must elicit a strong gut ‘I want to be in on this’ response in the listener, along one or more of the ‘triple bottom line’ dimensions: economic, environmental or social, the emphasis and mixture of which depends on the type and focus of the business, for instance for-profit vs. non-profit.

Of course, for our for-profit ventures, the economic motivation is the primary one: investors are looking for a return on their investment and the entrepreneur should be focused on that. If an opportunity elicits strong reactions in all three dimensions, all the better.

The question ‘Why you?’ can also be asked as ‘What is your sustainable competitive advantage?’ which for most early-stage ventures rests on its distinctive competence.

Everything else in a business story and plan supports these two fundamental pieces.

The business story is a set of defensible assertions. Almost every statement in a business story is a statement of actual or perceived fact; and, these facts must be backed up by research and data.

When strung together properly, these defensible assertions should form a story that is compelling, which it will be if it is an interesting opportunity, has a strong answer to the question ‘why you’ and the story is complete, clear, concise and consistent.

Standard business plan process

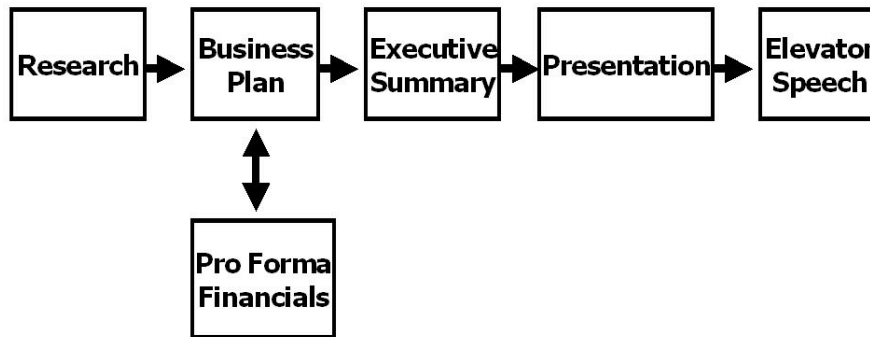
The classic approach to a business plan is similar to a phase-by-phase approach to building a work product.

First, you begin by doing six to twelve months of research: technology, product, market, etc.

After collecting all of your data, you sit down and write a 20 to 30-page business plan.

While writing the plan, you also develop an integrated set of 3-5 year Pro Forma Financials: Income Statement, Balance Sheet and Cash Flow Statement, along with an investment scenario and usage of funds.

Standard Business Plan Process



After completing the plan, you extract an executive summary. Then, you develop a presentation in PowerPoint or similar medium.

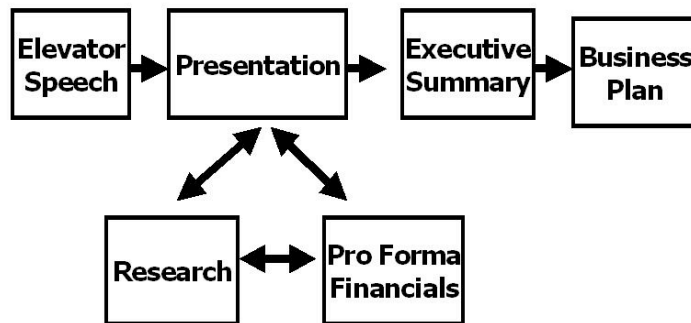
Finally, someone challenges you to condense it into a 30-second elevator speech, which can be the hardest task of all.

Then, the funding process happens in reverse: you meet an investor and give them your elevator pitch; they ask for your executive summary; they invite you in for a presentation; then (less and less often) they ask to see your business plan and full financials; if they are still interested, they may ask to look at your detailed research, though they are more likely to do their own.

Compelling business story prototyping process

The ASU Technopolis Launch Pad curriculum reverses this process. It utilizes modern principles of innovation in product development, with a focus on a prototyping approach to producing the work product: a compelling business story, which takes many forms.

Compelling Business Story Prototyping Process



We begin by asking the entrepreneur to express his or her venture’s story as a 30-second elevator speech. This forces them from the start to work on the essence of their story: a big opportunity that elicits a response and an answer to the question ‘why you?’ The story might include the value proposition, what you want from the listener (e.g. investment, a partnership, a customer, etc.), or some other highlight.

Then, we begin developing and giving the presentation: right from the start. We do this through a series of exercises that force the entrepreneur to do the appropriate research to answer typical business plan questions and develop integrated Pro Forma financials. It is critical that the entrepreneur take personal responsibility for this work. They must know the numbers behind the story cold.

The prototype presentation is enhanced each week as more is learned about the marketplace and the plan is developed in more detail. When is the presentation and, thus, the story/plan done? *Always and never.* It’s always done because whenever you give it, it is in the state it is in and it is done for that moment. It is never done, because your business plan changes as fast as the world changes around you.

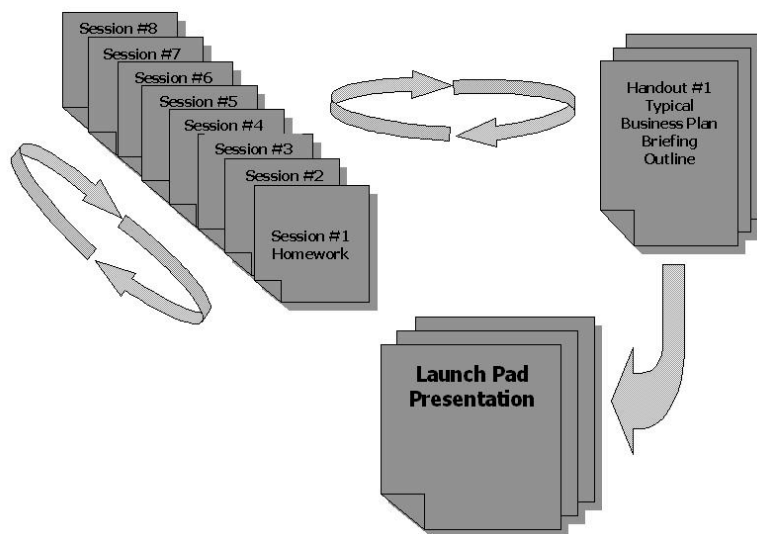
Because of the way we coach entrepreneurs to do presentations, they can rapidly produce an executive summary, because it basically consists of the verbal messages from the presentation. *Voilà*, 3-page executive summary. **Finally**, writing the business plan, if you are required to, is a relatively simple process, because you can turn each of the messages in the executive summary into a paragraph or so that communicates the details and shows the research you have done. *Voilà*, 20 or 30-page business plan.

This last step may slowly become a relic of the past as we are seeing more investors who don't want to read a 30 page plan – they want to capture the essence of the story, have faith in the team and do their own due diligence – and they can do so from a quality presentation supported by great research and detailed financials. **The entire process is iterative.** As new things happen, you can use the process and tools to rapidly rethink your story and plan, resulting in updates to the elevator speech, presentation, research, financials, exec summary and full business plan.

The Launch Pad coaching process

The Launch Pad curriculum is organized into 8 sessions, each with a specific focus. Each session consists of a set of one-page exercises that are deceptive in their simplicity: they are actually quite hard to complete and each typically results in considerable back-up research.

The Launch Pad Coaching Process



The purpose of the exercises is to develop the answers to typical questions that an investor expects entrepreneurs to address in a typical business plan presentation. We use one of many typical outlines that have been given to us over the years by investors. The entrepreneur uses this typical outline as a general guide to develop his or her specific presentation.

Thus, each session results in better answers to the typical questions, which results in a story that is more clear, concise, consistent, and complete and, thus, more compelling.

Toolbox and checklist for entrepreneurs

The process is organized into 8 sessions, the order of which has proven over and over again to be the most effective way of moving an entrepreneur or innovator through his or her thinking about the opportunity.

We begin by asking entrepreneurs to step up from the morass of details they are typically deluged with in day-to-day business and to think at the most strategic level about the opportunity, their uniqueness and how their venture will achieve its overall vision or goal.

Next, we have found that the best way to engage most innovators is by thinking about their technology and the products that can come from it (what is possible). We use Technology Roadmapping and other technology/product focused exercises to begin the planning exercise, with the last steps in the process asking “What markets should we target?” and “What do we think our customers will think of our products?”

This leads to a number of marketing and sales exercises that are focused on understanding the value chain, the type of buyer, the sales process and early stage revenue possibilities. The primary emphasis is on actually talking to real customers and other important value chain participants.

Then, we move on to understanding the competition in more detail, communicating the competitive differentiator and nailing the value proposition. The last two sessions bring it all together by focusing on operations, management, alliances and financials - though we typically begin discussing financial statements in the first session and weave finance and investing discussion throughout the sessions.

These sections support the “Big Opportunity” and the “Why you?” that are shaped primarily in the first four sessions and fully articulate the business model that will deliver that opportunity based on the sustainable competitive advantage. Each session consists of a set of one-page exercises, about 30 or 40 in all.

Beginning in the 3rd or 4th week, the entrepreneur begins doing the presentation every session. If possible, we put them on film at least the first dry run, to show them the distance they have to travel, and the last dry run, to show them how well they’ve traveled that distance.

Toolbox and Checklist for Entrepreneurs

<p>Session 1 – Introduction, Ground Rules, Strategic Planning <i>Exercises/Homework</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1 30-second “elevator” message 1.2 Sunflower exercise 1.3 One-page operating Plan Graphic 1.4 One Page Strategic Business Plan 1.5 Value Proposition Quiz 1.6 Storyboard of 15-minute presentation 1.7 Opening and closing message to briefing 1.8 Dream list of 20 briefing attendees 1.9 One page Executive Summary for Invitations 1.10 Handouts 1,2 & 5 1.11 Recommended Readings 	<p>Session5 – Operations, Management, Staffing <i>Exercises/Homework</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5.1 Manufacturing & Operations (final) 5.2 Handout #4 ‘Start-Up Teams’ by Sharon C. Ballard 5.3 “Dream” board and advisors 5.4 Organization Charts 5.5 CEO job description and time sheet 5.6 Wall Street Journal Adverts for key executives 5.7 Recruiting materials (executives, directors, advisors) 5.8 Fourth cut at all slides 5.9 Recommended Readings
<p>Session 2 – Technology, Intellectual Property, & Product Plans <i>Exercises/Homework</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2.1 Technology roadmaps 2.2 Product feature roadmap 2.3 Technical Skills Assessment 2.4 Manufacturing Plan, initial 2.5 Rob’s Quality Dog Food Test 2.6 First Cut at all slides 2.7 Recommended Readings 	<p>Session 6 – Financial Plan <i>Exercises/Homework</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6.1 Key assumptions by plan section 6.2 Revenues – ratio analyses 6.3 One page Profit/Loss, Cash Flow, Balance Sheets 6.4 Use of proceeds for all rounds 6.5 Valuation for all rounds 6.6 Strategic Alliances, Summary slides 6.7 Executive Summary 6.8 Fifth cut at all slides 6.9 Recommended Readings
<p>Session 3 – Marketing and Sales Plans <i>Exercises/Homework</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3.1 Value chain (food chain) graphic 3.2 One-page product data sheet 3.3 First order simulation e.g. purchase order or check for deposit 3.4 Price list 3.5 Interview financial analyst (questions in advance) 3.6 Interview customer(s) (questions in advance; also customer reference letters for sales forecasts) 3.7 Sales process flow chart or timeline 3.8 3-Year Revenue Projections 3.9 Second cut at all slides 3.10 Recommended Readings 	<p>Session 7 – Dry Run Presentations <i>Exercises/Homework</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7.1 Dress rehearsal of presentation 7.2 Dry-run feedback 7.3 Executive summary 7.4 Sixth cut at all slides 7.5 Recommended Readings
<p>Session 4 – Competition <i>Exercises/Homework</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4.1 Competitive Value Matrices 4.2 Competitive Notebooks 4.3 Competitive Graphic (summary) 4.4 Value Proposition refinement 4.5 “Successful Presentations” by Sharon C. Ballard 4.6 Third Cut at all slides 4.7 Recommended Readings 	<p>Session 8 – Final Presentation <i>Exercises/Homework</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8.1 Follow-up plans 8.2 Lessons learned 8.3 Skills assessment 8.4 Recommended Readings

Storyboard of a 15-minute presentation

We use an iterative approach to business plan presentation thinking and creation. The entrepreneur “prototypes” his business plan/story and repeatedly refines it and delivers the presentation on a week-by-week basis.

We begin the first week with a storyboard approach. On one piece of paper the entrepreneur draws 10 to 20 boxes with diagonals between them. The boxes are titled in the order in which the entrepreneur wants to tell the story, guided by our standard business plan briefing.

The story begins with an intro slide that typically follows a form such as Welcome + Thank You + Elevator Speech, which hooks the audience and “Tells Them What You’re Going to Tell Them.”

The body of the presentations is then a set of major messages or conclusions (which are defensible assertions) that are woven into a compelling story and, thus, “Tells Them.”

The Summary and Strategic Issues slides close the story, with a Major Points In Summary + Thanks Again + Over to You For Discussion, with the hand-off being a focus on the top 3-5 issues facing the entrepreneur. This is the third and final part: the “Tell Them What You Told Them”.

By the way, we always emphasize the point that 15 slides in 15 minutes means an average of one-minute talking time per slide, which is moving pretty fast. So we encourage the entrepreneur to be economical in their approach, while being both complete and concise. Twelve slides are close to ideal.

Storyboard of 15-Minute Presentation

Title	Problem or Opportunity	Technology and Product(s)	Customers	Market(s)	Competitors
Operations	Alliances	Management Team, Directors and Advisors	Financials	Summary	Strategic Issues

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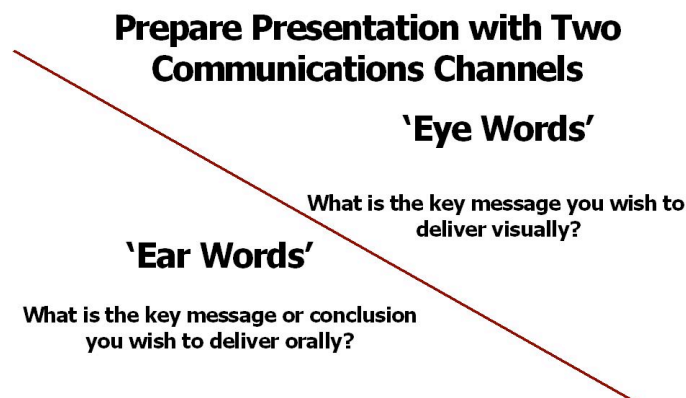
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Prepare presentation with two communications channels: ear and eye words

Like all storyboards, the Launch Pad storyboard is a high-level design and an initial prototype. Each space in the storyboard takes a specific form. Above the diagonal line of each slide section, the entrepreneur sketches or writes, by hand, how the slide’s topic will be represented visually. Below the diagonal line, the entrepreneur writes 3 to 5 terse messages or major conclusions that they wish the listener to grasp. Only after the storyboard has been refined by hand a few times does the entrepreneur begin to develop the actual slides, transferring the verbal messages to the note section of the presentation.

It is very, very important to take advantage of these two types of messages, visual and verbal. They are very distinct in how they are delivered, the quantity of information in each, the bandwidth on the receiving end, etc. The opportunity is to be very creative visually and to have the verbal and visual messages amplify one another. The alternative is to read off a bunch of text bullets. That makes for the most boring presentation in the world, and turns listeners off fast.



Of course, the final slides differ from the original storyboard, because each week the entrepreneur is learning more and enhancing the story and, thus constantly refining the visual and verbal messages. But 5 messages per slide and 15 slides equate to 75 messages and that’s a lot to communicate in 15 minutes. Weaving all this into a compelling story is a challenge. However, once the speaker is in command of the full set of messages they can be spontaneous in their delivery by filling out the story with examples, experiences, facts, sources and other research they’ve developed during the process.

If the entrepreneur has done a good job of maintaining the verbal messages in the notes section of the presentation, he or she can copy them into a document and, *voilà*, a 3-page executive summary. Because all messages are defensible assertions, it is easy to turn each message into a paragraph with

research information (the defense) and, *voilà*, a 20 to 30-page business plan. Just add Pro Forma financials developed along the way! Repeat the entire process as one learns more and the market changes.

Planting your own sunflower

The Sunflower exercise, taken from Rob Ryan's book Smart-ups, is just one example of the type of thinking exercise we use. It forces the entrepreneur to articulate the venture's core competency (the center), the general market that the venture addresses (the ground), the major drivers that are calling the venture's core competency into the market (the stem), and the product and service forms in which the core competency will appear (the petals).

An entrepreneur typically identifies LOTS of petals, especially technology/science entrepreneurs with horizontal technologies that are capable of doing so many things.

The last step in the exercise is the most difficult and it begins to address the number 1 challenge most early-stage entrepreneurs face: that of focus. We ask the entrepreneur to prioritize the petals in the order they imagine they will be rolled out to the marketplace (selecting a 'beachhead landing' in the marketplace).

Of course, this is a complex decision we are asking them to make and this is just a first cut at it. But, we hold their feet to the fire to make a choice and justify it, making the point that they can only choose one item to be first and they must focus on it alone, or at maximum a few items that are closely related.

Plant your own Sunflower



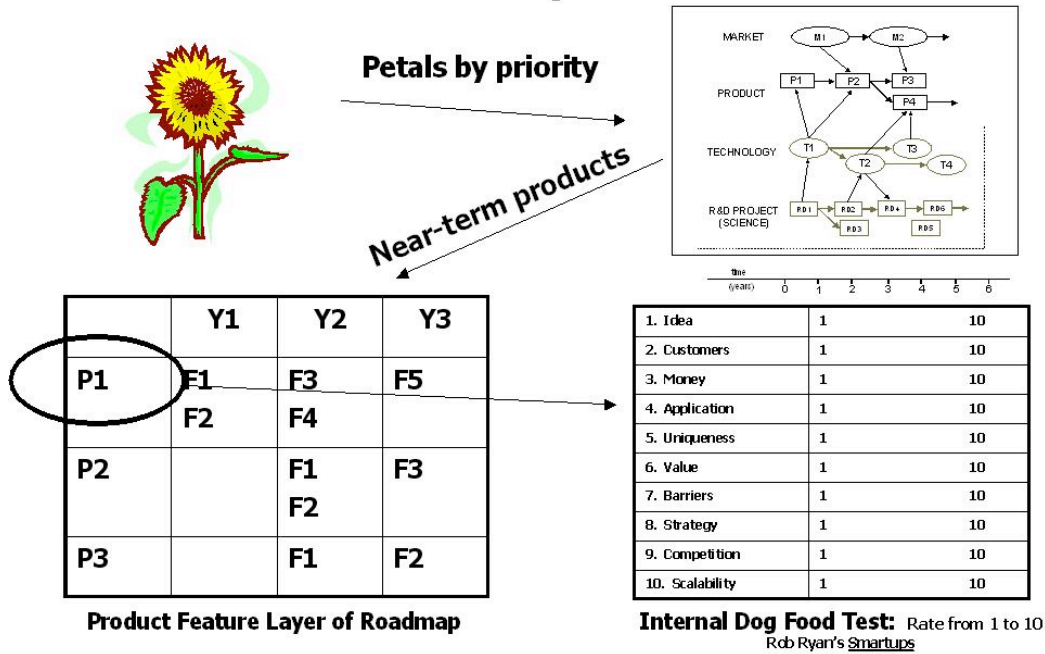
Used with permission, Cornell University Press. Rob Ryan (2002) Smart-ups: Lessons from Rob Ryan's Entrepreneur America Boot Camp for Start-Ups. Cornell University Press.

Example: product development process

This is an example of how individual exercises fit together to form an overall product planning process in Session 2, Technology, Intellectual Property and Product Plans.

The Sunflower exercise is the first step in Technology/Product Roadmapping, which links Markets, Products/ Services, Technologies and Research activities over a period of time, typically greater than 5 years.

Product Development Process



The products and services that were numbered in Rob Ryan’s Sunflower exercise (from his book Smartups) go on the roadmap in the order they were prioritized, and the entrepreneur creates a planning diagram that links together the various R&D activities in a time-based critical path manner.

This roadmap can serve as the basis for many things: R&D planning & budgeting, technology assessment, access to critical research and technologies, skills assessment, personnel planning, etc. The roadmap also serves to further the entrepreneur’s thinking from Technology/Product to Product/Market, thus transitioning to a more traditional ‘market pull’ mentality.

The products and services that will occur in the first few years are then planned further in a Product Feature Roadmap, in which the major features that generate the value to the customer are planned in annual releases.

Finally, the first product for the first market is internally tested by the venture using Rob Ryan's Dog Food Test from Smartups, which tests the viability and competitiveness of the product along 10 dimensions. This first draft is done internally without a lot of customer input.

These exercises then lead into the Session 3, Marketing and Sales Plans. The Product exercises become the basis for a product data sheet and some of the questions that are going to be asked in interviews with customers, analysts and other value chain participants to be identified in Session 3.

Manifestations of the Launch Pad curriculum

The Launch Pad curriculum is also used in a variety of different courses. *Supercoach® Entrepreneurial Training* is used to train new coaches in the Launch Pad methodology.

Launch Pad is eight to ten weeks of one-on-one coaching leading to a business plan briefing before a panel of 10 to 20 experts tailored for the venture's specific needs.

The *Launch Prep Entrepreneurship Course* is a six-week, one-night-a-week, three-hours-a-night general introduction to entrepreneurship, and reaches into the community of experts to serve as guest speakers and panelists.

Starting a Venture is a stand-alone semester long course that can be offered in a degree program in any school or college.

We also work with universities, economic development organizations and others to include the Launch Pad principles, processes and exercises into discipline-specific courses for the purposes of embedding entrepreneurship into all disciplines and teaching entrepreneurship to students, professors, service providers and budding entrepreneurs.

Manifestations of Launch Pad Curriculum

- ***Supercoach® Entrepreneurial Training Course***
(train the trainer)
- **Launch Pad**
- **Launch Prep Entrepreneurship Course**
- **Starting A Venture**
 - Stand-alone semester course
- **Embedded in discipline-specific course**
 - To support key project: plan, proposal, etc.
 - One to three day seminar, or
 - Weekly exercises thread

Dan O'Neill is Entrepreneurial Coach for Entrepreneurial Services of ASU's Office of Research and Economic Affairs. As the primary coach for the ASU Technopolis, Edson Student Entrepreneur and other entrepreneurial programs, Mr. O'Neill teaches entrepreneurship, assists in the teaching of the SBIR curriculum, develops other entrepreneurial coaches and curriculum, and helps other organizations around the globe implement similar programs. He was co-founder and President of Hologix, a venture backed enterprise software firm, which imported \$100 million of revenue and capital into Arizona. In his roles as CEO of DJT Enterprises, Mr. O'Neill delivers strategy and business development services to a variety of technology and life science companies. A life-long Arizona resident, Mr. O'Neill has contributed to a wide range of community development efforts including the Governor's Innovation and Technology Council (Tech Development and Transfer Committee), the Battelle Advanced Communications and Information Technology Committee, ASU's W.P. Carey Department of Information Systems Professional Advisory Board and ASU's W.P. Carey CABIT Advisory Board. Mr. O'Neill is also President of the Board of Trustees of Childsplay, Arizona's professional theatre for young audiences, and was a founding board member of the Maple Ash Neighborhood Association and NewTown, a Community Development Corporation, both located in downtown Tempe.



Sharon C. Ballard is President and CEO of EnableVentures, Inc., and former President and Chief Executive and co-founder of Reticular Systems, Inc. She held management posts in Titan Corporation, Motorola Inc. and LINKABIT Corporation. As UCSD CONNECT Management Fellow, she coached early-stage science and technology entrepreneurs. She is the developer of the Supercoach® Entrepreneurship Training. She has coached entrepreneurs in Europe and across the US. She is one of two founding Management Fellows for Arizona State University's Technopolis Program focusing on educating, coaching and networking early-stage entrepreneurs.



Dr Jonathan Levie is a Senior Lecturer and former Director of the Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship at the University of Strathclyde. He has been researching and teaching entrepreneurship for over 20 years and has managed both new and growing firms. He has held research and teaching posts at the London Business School; INSEAD, France; Babson College, US; and University College Cork, Ireland. He created the Technology Entrepreneurship for Postgraduates Programme at the Hunter Centre and an innovative and highly successful MBA course based around Supercoach® techniques.

