



Top Young Entrepreneurs 2007 July 17, 2007, 1:24PM EST

Whatever Happened to the Class of '06?

No losers here—this year it's straight A's for the winners of *BusinessWeek's* Europe's Young Entrepreneurs contest

by [Andy Reinhardt](#)

What has become of the 15 nominees and six winners of last year's Europe's Young Entrepreneurs contest? We reached out to all of them and heard back from 10, and for the most part, the news is good. In fact, many said that their participation in the contest and the attention it garnered had been a major lift—either in attracting further media coverage or bringing in customers and business partners from around the world.

The Price is Right

Last year's top vote-getter, **Ben Woldring**, got perhaps the biggest publicity boost. His Netherlands company, Bencom, runs a collection of consumer-oriented price comparison Web sites that allow Dutch users to search for the best deals on mobile phone service, broadband Internet access, and utilities (see [BusinessWeek.com](#), 11/14/06, "[Europe's Best Young Entrepreneurs 2006](#)").

After the *BusinessWeek* contest, Woldring was showered with coverage by the Dutch press as well as by media from other European countries. He was invited to give a presentation to the Emerging Young Entrepreneurs Society (EYES) and has received business inquiries from Canada, Australia, and South Africa, among other places.

And what of the business itself? Woldring is a bit coy about results, but says that Bencom's revenues remain on track to double every two years and that he has enjoyed a "steady" increase in traffic to the Bencom sites, several of which have been redesigned and enhanced since last year. Next up: Bencom plans to launch an international vertical search engine within the next few months, taking the company into a whole new market.

In the Round File

Runner-up **James Gibson** has had a tougher time—one perhaps more typical of many startups. His big idea, hatched when he was still a university student, was a new way to dispense trash bin liners by unrolling them from a box stashed at the bottom of the can. Gibson's BinFix won some design awards and attracted a lot of attention, including from a major (unidentified) seller of so-called "fast-moving consumer goods."

Starting last October, Gibson and the company spent six months trying to negotiate a licensing deal. But in the end, he says, the FMCG company couldn't figure out where to fit BinFix liners into its product portfolio. Gibson was disappointed but unbowed. "There's clearly a market for BinFix, and being a true entrepreneur means having buckets of determination and persistence," he says.

Gibson has now started negotiations with another consumer products company that, he says, already makes trash-related products and has a suitable brand for BinFix to fit under. The lessons? Agree in advance to a shorter negotiating time and don't put all your eggs in one basket—or in this case, trash bin.

A Persuasive Case

What about the No. 3 vote-getter, **Lars Duursma**? His Rotterdam company, Debatrix, has gone gangbusters since last fall. Debatrix offers an unusual range of services, including communications coaching and managing public debates for corporate and public-sector clients. In the last year, Duursma says, revenues have soared 300%.

Thanks in part to the exposure he gained from the *BusinessWeek* contest, Duursma has become a highly-visible expert on rhetoric and persuasion, appearing often on Dutch TV and radio shows, especially during last fall's election. The energetic entrepreneur writes frequent newspaper columns on political speech and other topics and has launched a Dutch blog on the art of debate. He's also at work on what he promises will be a "provocative and entertaining" book about persuasion.

The screenshot shows the BusinessWeek website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'HOME INVESTING COMPANIES TECH AUTOS INNOVATION SMALL BIZ B-SCHOOLS CAREERS ASIA EUROPE MAGAZINE'. Below that, a 'Special Report' section is highlighted with a red background, titled 'Europe's Top Young Entrepreneurs 2007'. To the right, there's a 'RELATED STORIES' section with a list of five items: 1. Bloggers Bring in the Big Bucks, 2. Zander May Be Sleeping Out of Bed, 3. A Web Phone Called Joomla, 4. Archimede's Storm Starbucks, 5. The Gandhi Protesters Pay Off. Below the main article, there are sections for 'StatCounter Rakes in the Clicks', 'Nominees: Europe's Young Entrepreneurs 2007', and 'Whatever Happened to the Class of '06?'. The page also features a 'MARKET INFO' section with stock market data and a 'Get Free RSS Feed' button.

Debatrix, meanwhile, is set to open its first office outside the Netherlands, in Istanbul. Duursma calls Turkey "one of the biggest and most attractive markets in Europe," and says he thinks good debate will help Turkey and the West communicate better. He's also talking with potential partners about opening other international branch offices.

Problems We'd Love to Have

It's a similar picture of success for the other three top winners. **Karm Singh**, who had started South Asian music and movies site Desitouch.com just a few months before the 2006 contest began, reports that business is booming. As of last fall he was hoping to reach 100,000 hits a month by the end of the year. Now, he says traffic has increased tenfold since January, topping "multiple millions" per month, with thousands of unique visitors every day. Singh has managed to sign up a host of partners in Indian cinema to deliver exclusive trailers via Desitouch, including for the new film *Don*, starring Shahrukh Khan. And his role in helping bring Web 2.0 to Bollywood earned him a recent meeting with top industry players at the 2007 Indian Film Awards. Pretty heady stuff.

Marvin Dominic Andrä is having trouble meeting soaring demand for his BagPax, a series of protective liners that keep car trunks and hatchbacks from getting soiled by messy payloads. He got dozens of distribution inquiries from around the world as a result of last year's contest and still hopes to develop a few into real partnerships. But the biggest news by far was getting picked up by SystemPartner Autoteile, a prominent distributor in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria that handles products from [Robert Bosch](#) as well as [Sonax](#) car polish and WD-40 lubricant. That, plus placement in several mail-order catalogs, is straining Andrä's manufacturer, so he's rethinking his outsourcing strategy. That's the sort of problem most entrepreneurs would love to face.

Business is strong at Jobetudiant.net, as well. The French job-seeking site aimed at students expects to double its revenues this year, to about \$200,000, says founder **Julien Genestoux**. But alas for Genestoux, who attended business school while running the company, he still hasn't been able to become a full-time entrepreneur. Early this year he moved to San Francisco to work for a French bank, leaving day-to-day operations in the hands of three employees. Now he's hatching other startup ideas on the West Coast.

Other nominees who didn't make the top of the vote tally report similar growth and success. **Tristan Cowell**, whose startup IC-Innovations makes novelty items for displaying photographs and greeting cards, has landed his third consecutive Christmas order from retailing giant Asda ([WMT](#)). He has signed up international distributors for his Photo Hang Ups and Fridge Hang Ups lines. And he has even broken into Walgreens ([WAG](#)) in the U.S., which could be a big boost in the future. Sales topped \$500,000 last year, and Cowell has more than \$1,000,000 in orders on the books. With six new product launches set for this year, he says "it is lining up to be a very busy, very amusing time for all concerned."

All Around the World

Neil Waller has ridden a rocket ship with his company, Information Websites. Originally conceived as a way to provide information to tourists about Marbella, Spain, the Web site caught on with locals as well, prompting Waller to contemplate expanding to other resort destinations. True to his word, he has since rolled out sites for the Algarve, Chamonix, and Dubai, using a mix of company-owned and franchised operations. He also completely overhauled the back-end technology to make the site more robust, and forged a hotel booking deal with a tour operator, including a revenue-sharing relationship. Now Waller is considering sites for Cannes, Miami, Sydney, and Cape Town, among others, and is looking for additional partners. He hopes to have a total of 18 sites by the end of 2008.

Bean2Bed, based in Birmingham, England, is about to hit the \$2 million mark in sales. The company's novel beanbag chairs that convert to beds in a snap have been a hit around Britain and are now entering France, says co-founder **Matt Roberts**. Bean2Bed was recently named a regional finalist in a nationwide entrepreneurship contest, called Start-Up Stars, run by HSBC ([HBC](#)). Roberts and business partner **Irfan Badakshi** are now planning two new product lines: licensed sports team covers for their chair-beds, and a set of pet products called Pet2Bed. Eventually they aim to make Bean2Bed a household name.

Last but not least, **Wayne Berko** has seen big expansion at his Uni-versalEXTRAS, a talent agency that brings together film extras looking for work and film companies looking for extras. The company has moved into the big time, securing jobs for films produced by studios including Dreamworks ([DWA](#)), Universal Pictures ([GE](#)), Columbia Pictures ([SNE](#)), and the [BBC](#), to name a few. Berko also has branched out into supplying behind-the-camera talent, such as production runners. Thanks to his growing reputation Berko has been asked to speak at entrepreneurship events and to participate in several government-backed programs that encourage young people to make their mark.

All in all, a pretty dazzling progress report from a group of entrepreneurs who are still barely in their mid-20s. These are business people to keep an eye on.

[Click here](#) for the slide show of this year's winners.

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