

## Fishing for funds

### Nineteen companies are making presentations in a bid to draw interest from venture capitalists.

By Christopher Boyd | Sentinel Staff Writer, Orlando Sentinel  
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Nineteen Florida businesses are playing a high-stakes game of show and tell at the Omni at Champions Gate resort this week, opening their corporate hearts to nearly 150 investment firms in hopes of luring much-needed cash.

In an annual ritual now in its 14th year, the Florida Venture Capital Conference is introducing a fresh crop of aspiring businesses to venture capitalists in search of worthy prospects.

"Why am I here?" asked William Warren, chief executive of VaxDesign, a newly minted Orlando biotechnology firm. "If you want to go fishing, you should go where the fish are. And there are a lot of fish here."

Seven-month-old VaxDesign hopes to raise nearly \$90 million to help fund its two major projects: the development of an artificial immune system for use in medical testing, and the creation of new vaccines.

Eleven companies each made a 12-minute presentation on Thursday. The remaining eight face investors today. Although recent surveys suggest that the venture-capital markets are beginning to come to life again after a three-year slump, cautious investors are still a hard sell.

Jon Kislak, a partner in Antares Capital Corp. in Miami Lakes, said Florida companies are still having a hard time finding funds.

"There is simply a lack of organized money for start-ups," Kislak said. "Yet I would say there are a lot of good companies out there with solid business plans."

"Florida Venture Forum is sponsoring the two-day event, which ends today. About 1,000 attendees came from across the country to consider investment opportunities and to network with each other."

Florida companies have had a hard time raising venture capital. Although investment surged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it plummeted after the dot-com and technology busts and has been slow returning.



Charles Resnick, managing partner with Inflexion Partners, an Orlando venture-capital firm, said he thinks the investment market will gain strength this year. Attendance at the conference is up more than 25 percent from last year, suggesting growing investor interest.

Resnick said Florida needs more homegrown venture funds if it hopes to nourish its growing businesses.

"The state needs to figure out how to get three or four more Inflexions," Resnick said. "Seventyfive percent of all venture deals are done within 50 miles of the venture capital firm's office, so local firms are very important.

Phillip Gerard, executive vice president for sales and marketing with DTx Inc. of Melbourne, was confident that his company's presentation would stir investor interest. DTx makes electronic controllers used in high-tech medical devices.

"Investors are looking for business plans that can be executed," Gerard said. "We have a strong plan and we're growing quickly. We're looking at making strategic acquisitions, and we believe DTx could become the dominant player in its market."

At the end of the day, after making his presentation, Gerard said he was encouraged.

"We really didn't expect to find the kind of acceptance that we received," Gerard said. "Who knows, maybe the purse strings really are beginning to loosen."

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