

'Agitating' for startups

BY KATHARINE GRAYSON
STAFF WRITER

Minnesota has most of what it takes to gain a national reputation as a hub for entrepreneurship and innovation — talent, great ideas and strong infrastructure. What it's still missing, say founders of a newly-formed group, is "mojo."

To change that, a group of entrepreneurs, investors, attorneys and other business leaders have come together to launch a new organization called Mojo Minnesota. The group, which held its official launch party last month, wants to drum up excitement and generate self confidence among the state's startups and policy makers, with a mix of community-building events and grass-roots activism.

"We're not a task force, we're not a think tank, we're not an event-planning group," said Brad Lehrman, a Mojo Minnesota co-founder, venture capitalist and shareholder at Minneapolis law firm Lommen, Abdo, Cole, King and Stageberg. The group sees itself more as a network of "agitators" who want to encourage risk-taking and raise Minnesota's profile for entrepreneurship.

Lehrman and Ernest Grumbles, an intellectual-property attorney at Minneapolis law firm Merchant & Gould, decided to form the group more than a year ago. Both heard entrepreneurs voice frustrations with Minnesota's innovation climate.

While Minnesota is rightly proud of large, public companies such as Best Buy Co. Inc. and Medtronic Inc., the state needs to focus on what's next, Grumbles said. "We have a strong legacy. All those are great stories, but we need to raise the bar. We need to ask, 'What's the next, big, badass company?'"

Part of the group's role will be to advocate for public-policy changes that support innovation. Members lobbied in support of the recently passed angel-investor tax credit. The law awards angel investors a tax credit worth 25 percent of their investment in a Minnesota startup company.



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Ernest Grumbles, left, and Brad Lehrman are two founders of Mojo Minnesota, a sort of activism group for new ventures.

MOJO MINNESOTA'S "AGITATORS"

Tim Bachman, a principal at Primordial Soup, a St. Paul-based product-design firm
Rick Brimacombe, founder of Brimacombe & Associates and a general partner at venture firm Sherpa Partners

Kim Garretson, a former director of emerging media at Best Buy. He also was a venture-capital liaison for the company.

Ernest Grumbles, an intellectual-property attorney at Merchant & Gould who works with startups

Andy Halper, a researcher, educator and "training guru," who's worked with groups such as Charthouse Learning, Hallmark Cards and the United Nations

Brad Lehrman, shareholder at Lommen, Abdo, Cole, King and Stageberg. He works with startup companies and led investments in more than 20 companies as the head of Portage Capital Inc.

Joy Lindsay, president and co-founder of venture capital firm StarTec Investments

Mary Meehan, co-founder of Iconoculture, a consumer-research firm that was recently sold

Damian Novak, a serial entrepreneur

Marti Nyman, a former director of global innovation networks for Best Buy Co. Inc. He also held leadership positions at ADC Telecommunications Inc., General Electric and other companies.

Jeff O'Dell, an entrepreneur who founded and sold software firm August Technology

Going forward, Mojo also plans to host events that "compress the space between funders and small companies," to encourage venture-capital investment, Lehrman said.

Mojo's goal also is to get Minnesota to brag more about activity here, and encourage entrepreneurs to be

less afraid of failure, he said. "The Minnesota middle-ground culture has in many ways served us well. But in a very competitive economy, we need to be more agitated and work together to solve our problems."