

Nordic Startup Awards: Hot Tech from the Cold Zone

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22 May 2014

Think of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden and the first thing that pops into your brain might not be a thriving technology scene.

Finnish technology firm Nokia's struggles, which led to the recent sale of its handset business, have been well documented. Meanwhile its rival, Sweden's Ericsson, has halved its workforce after abandoning consumer electronics to focus on network equipment.

But there are some notable Nordic success stories, particularly in gaming, with Angry Birds' Rovio, Minecraft's Mojang and Clash of Clans' Supercell all based in the area.

The Swedish music streaming service Spotify has also become a household name.

In a bid to build on these successes, the Nordic Startup Awards have been created.

Sponsored by companies including Facebook, Amazon, Google and Microsoft, the organisation picks seven prize winners whose work they think deserves attention.

"What's different for the Nordics is that the firms have to think globally from the beginning because the local markets are too small," says Kim Balle, the event's Norwegian co-founder.

The BBC spoke to him and one of this year's jurors - Danish tech entrepreneur Michael Bodekær - to find out why the judges picked who they did.

Start-up of the Year: Plain Vanilla Games

Iceland-based Plain Vanilla has racked up about 20 million downloads for its iPhone and Android general knowledge game QuizUp since it launched in November.

The app is free, but makes money by selling experience points that unlock tougher questions.

The firm has also signed a deal with Coca-Cola and the Fifa World Cup, which will see them add new categories to its topics.

"When a success like Rovio comes along, then people look at that and become inspired by it," says Mr Bodekær.

"A lot of entrepreneurship is driven by role-models, and Plain Vanilla might be the result of this effect."

Mr Waldekranz is the creator of Tictail - a service that allows small retailers to set up their own websites.

The Swedish firm provides access to its store designs and payment system for free, but takes a 30% cut from third-party add-ons sold from its app store.

The apps include software that allows a store to accept discount coupon codes; the ability to chat with clients currently looking at products; and an app that automatically sends out "back in stock" emails to customers who were unable to buy what they wanted first time round.

Mr Bodekær says the judges were attracted by the potential of this app store.

"If Tictail can find a way to allow all of these smaller retailers to leverage scales of economies by setting up common warehouses and so forth, then I think it has a very good chance of offering a very disruptive technology," he explains.

"It will be a tough fight though, and it makes Tictail a potentially interesting acquisition for Amazon, I imagine." MINECRAFT

Early-stage investor Lifeline Ventures must be content with its decision to help fund Finnish games-maker Supercell.

The Finnish firm's 2011 investment delivered a 4,000 times rate of return after the developer sold half of itself for \$1.5bn (£890,000) last year.

Lifeline has also taken stakes in a hi-tech waste collection business, an app that helps people locate the doctor of their choice, and a business developing 3D-printed toys.

"It's just as much about giving the right advice and the right connections to the right people to get a start-up to get beyond its early stages, as it is providing funds," says Mr Bodekær.

"And that's what Lifeline appears to have done."

The crowdfunding market is a crowded place.

But FundedByMe aims to stand out from better known rivals including Kickstarter and Indiegogo by offering investors a stake in the projects they fund rather than the promise of early access to a product or some other benefit.

Successes include a campaign to bring dairy-free organic ice cream to Finland, and an effort to manufacture clothing that promises to help hospitalised children heal faster.

Mr Bodekær suggests that offering the potential of a profit would encourage people to take a chance on more speculative ideas.

"If you tried to make a Kickstarter for something that would only be delivered in five or six years you would never be successful," says Mr Bodekær.

"Whereas here, FundedByMe opens the way up for highly disruptive technologies by allowing people to invest in things that take more time to develop."

Mr Nielsen is the Danish creator of Screenmailer, free software that records the owner's PC screen activity and allows them to email or stream the video.

It's far from being the only product to offer such functions, but the judges believed it stood out from rivals.

"I'm a developer myself - and for me personally it was the eye for detail," says Mr Bodekær.

"It comes back to one of the strong differentiators for the Nordic countries.

"I really see them as being on the cutting edge for usability, and I see that in this product too."

Stockholm-based Jumpstarter aims to make it as simple and as fast as possible to get a website hosted on its servers.

"The interesting thing is that this is such a competitive market, there are so many small hosting providers out there," says Mr Bodekær.

"But Jumpstarter's one-click install makes it easy to use.

"It does what I think Nordic start-ups especially tend to get right - simple designs that are highly user-friendly and easy to get started."

Mr Anderson edits ArcticStartup, a Helsinki-based English-language blog about digital start-ups in the region.

Mr Balle says the seven-year-old site has filled an important gap in the market.

"It works in the Nordics because it is for the Nordics," he says.

"It may be less relevant to other audiences.

"We are very close in culture and it's very easy for us to collaborate if we know about each other."

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