

Cast Your Vote for the Best Student 'Brand Builder'

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As 25 teams of undergraduate innovators head to e-Fest this week, they've prepared one-minute sneak previews of their innovations and the markets they hope to reach. Vote for your favorite!

MINNEAPOLIS, April 21, 2026 — In just a few days, e-Fest® 2026 will bring together 25 of the top undergraduate startup teams from across North America for three days of competition, mentorship, and pitching at the University of St. Thomas.

It's a chance for student founders to move beyond the classroom, testing their ideas, refining how they communicate them, and getting real feedback from experienced entrepreneurs, investors, and judges.

But if you're part of the EIX community, you don't have to wait to see that process in action...We're excited to share an early look.

The Brand Builder videos offer a preview of the teams before they ever take the stage: how they're thinking about their venture, who they're building for, and how they're working to communicate that clearly.

A First Look at the Founders

The **Brand Builder Award** (<https://efest.biz/brand-builder/vote>) gives us the opportunity to share these teams with the broader community ahead of the competition.

Each team was asked to create a 60-second video answering three questions:

- What's your venture?
- What problem are you solving?
- How are you connecting with your audience?

It sounds straightforward. It isn't.

In one minute, founders have to decide what actually matters, what to emphasize, what to cut, and how to communicate their venture clearly enough that someone unfamiliar with it can understand, and care.

This is different from a traditional elevator pitch. That comes later at e-Fest, during **Pitch Slam!**, a fast-paced, high-stakes competition where founders have 90-seconds, no slides, and no safety net to make their case live, just as they would with investors.

The Brand Builder challenge is something else. Here, the focus is on how well teams understand their customer, and how they plan to reach them in real, tangible ways. Not broad statements about market size. Not generic claims about traction. But:

- Who is this actually for?
- Why would they care?
- What would make them click "learn more" or "buy now"?
- And just as important, how do you communicate that clearly?

This isn't about hype or overly polished marketing. It's about whether the message works.

You'll see a range. Some teams are very clear and polished; others are still working through it. That's part of the process. And that's what e-Fest is about—learning, testing, and getting better.

From EIX to e-Fest

e-Fest originated from **EIX (Entrepreneur & Innovation Exchange)** a platform built to share research and practical insight from entrepreneurship scholars and experienced founders.

A lot of what's published on EIX focuses on things that are easy to say but harder to do well: understanding



your audience, communicating your value clearly, and matching your message to the moment. The Brand Builder challenge is a direct application of those ideas.

For example, the [Founder Storytelling Framework](https://eiexchange.com/content/the-founder-storytelling-framework-match-your-pitch-to-your-mark?search=Founder%20Storytelling%20Framework) (<https://eiexchange.com/content/the-founder-storytelling-framework-match-your-pitch-to-your-mark?search=Founder%20Storytelling%20Framework>) research article by [Jonathan Freedom](https://eiexchange.com/profiles/2733/jonathan-freedom) (<https://eiexchange.com/profiles/2733/jonathan-freedom>), [Shannon Younger](https://eiexchange.com/profiles/2904/shannon-younger) (<https://eiexchange.com/profiles/2904/shannon-younger>) and [Chad Navis](https://eiexchange.com/profiles/2510/chad-navis) (<https://eiexchange.com/profiles/2510/chad-navis>) emphasizes that there isn't one "perfect" pitch; what works depends on who you're speaking to. Founders need to shape their message based on the audience in front of them. You can see that play out in these videos.

At the same time, insights from [Jennifer Nelson](https://eiexchange.com/profiles/2150/jennifer-nelson) (<https://eiexchange.com/profiles/2150/jennifer-nelson>) on [social media strategy and digital marketing](https://eiexchange.com/content/How-to-develop-a-successful-social-media-strategy?search=social%20media%20strategy%20and%20digital%20marketing) (<https://eiexchange.com/content/How-to-develop-a-successful-social-media-strategy?search=social%20media%20strategy%20and%20digital%20marketing>) highlight that strong messaging isn't enough; it needs to capture attention and drive engagement in a crowded, fast-moving environment. That's the challenge here. In 60 seconds, these founders have to explain their ventures clearly and show why they matter.

Now It's Your Turn | Watch the Videos and Cast Your Vote

All 25 finalist videos are now live, and public voting is open. This is your chance to engage directly with the ventures and see how effectively these founders are applying what they've learned. As you watch, consider:

- Is the problem clear right away?
- Do you understand who this is for?
- Does the solution make sense?
- Do you want to learn more?

Then vote for the top 3 teams that stand out to you.

How to vote:

- Watch the 60-second videos from the Top 25 teams
- Select your **top 3 favorites**

- Submit your vote before **April 25 at 4:00 PM CT**

Watch and Vote Here:

<https://efest.biz/brand-builder/vote>

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