

Making dough from grass

For many start-up companies, attracting key investment is often more challenging than creating the concept.

GOLD Coast-based signage company GrassAds, was able to raise capital once a clear understanding of where investor funds were to be injected into the company.

With assistance from the Federal Government's Commercialising Emerging Technologies (COMET) program and early stage investment advisor Angels Institute, the company was able to launch its product into the lucrative US golfing tournament market.

Managing director Ian Mainfield and director Michael Sherlock (former Brumby's Bakeries CEO) have secured a major client in US golf after signing up several contracts to 'brand' tournaments on the lucrative professional circuit.

"Before seeking investment, we looked at the end result," says Mainfield, of the company's restructured marketing strategy.

"The good thing about Angels Institute was that we were able to interview potential investors, and we have raised enough capital to break into the US."

Mainfield says he was 'already comfortable with the market' in the US, having set up shop in Florida. The GrassAds technology was designed on the Gold Coast. It uses a robotic 'artist' to create grass advertising at sporting events. The fully transportable method has been used by sponsors to advertise at major sporting events around the world, including golf, international cricket, NRL, international rugby tests, the State of Origin, V8 Supercars, the Commonwealth Games and gridiron in the US.

The technology drives a small robot called Druit, which is programmed to draw an outline of any graphic on a playing field or sporting surface, regardless of size or complexity. The ads are sized and the perspective altered on-site to suit the available area and complement the surroundings. The original idea for developing Druit was based on being able to create quality grass advertising for use on golf courses, which have endless contours, it offers a variety of options for presentations on grass. Traditional methods of creating graphics on grass, such as with the use of stencils, do not have the flexibility of Druit, which has the ability to adjust the size and perspective of the graphic to suit different viewing angles and variable presentation areas.

"We have advanced the technology so that



Get off the grass - Gold Coast technology a hit in the US.

it has become cost-efficient to do things like charity events where there are multiple sponsors," says Mainfield.

"We are not spending a lot on development now and can focus on marketing which will result in good returns over the next 12 months."

The company's foray into the US is expected to propel 200 per cent growth in 2009.

Angels Institute has also proved a sound stepping stone for Cheeta Australia, which has successfully researched and developed the Cheeta powered hand truck. The motorised trolley is used by fuel companies to transport oil drums short distances.

Angels Institute CEO Rick McElhinney, says investors are increasingly interested in supporting entrepreneurs despite recent volatility in the stock market.

"Those involved in early-stage investments can relax as these investments tend towards a lengthier timeframe and volatility of the market should have little effect on returns. As with any times of volatility, opportunities abound for those with cash resources," he says.

"Our members are drawn from private groups, including investors and mentors who are interested in supporting and/or financing early-stage ventures. Early-stage investing today is analogous to the early days of the stock market where railways and gold mining stocks attempted to attract

scarce investment dollars. Clever people made their fortunes during these exiting times."

* Rick McElhinney has co-authored a new book, *Commercialising Innovation with Rodney Overton*. For the chance to win one of two copies, email cl@gcbtn.com.au with 'innovate' in the subject header.

Other Gold Coast technology capital raisers:

Founders Forum

This not-for-profit company, set up on the Gold Coast in 2000, gives inventors the opportunity to present their ideas to investors. The group meets bi-monthly, and with a huge database of contacts and venture capitalists has been successful in raising more than \$40 million to help inventors get their products to market.

InQbator

Established on the Gold Coast in 1999 with federal government backing and a brief to provide seed investment to innovative companies with global growth opportunities, inQbator invests in the information technology, telecommunications and bio-informatics sectors; or any business that is enabled by one of these new technologies. InQbator manages a portfolio of 15 active companies across Australia and has raised an additional \$35 million in follow-on capital to affect the planned commercialisation process.