

Wireless company is seeking innovative ideas

Firms aim to impress at Sprint Nextel forum

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Sprint Nextel has invited companies to its campus to present ideas in hopes of getting financing for research and development projects. - Photo illustration by Shane Keyser/The Kansas City Star

Rick Nash and other high-tech entrepreneurs are heading to **Sprint Nextel Corp.** today with hopes of getting their big break.

Some might win a contract. Others could get investment cash for their company.

Sprint has signed up more than 200 representatives from Kansas City area firms to come see whether they can help develop the next hot wireless service.

"I am excited to see what Sprint has in mind," said Nash, who runs the newly opened Overland Park office of information technology consultant **Acquity Group**. "They are bringing all these folks in to talk about innovation. It will be interesting to see what their vision of innovation is."

The invitation-only gathering at Sprint's Overland Park campus is part of a drive for innovation that the nation's third-largest wireless carrier is fueling with new approaches, a new team, and \$50 million to \$100 million a year.

"A big part of the mission of this innovation team is to reach outside the walls of Sprint Nextel to find companies with very good ideas," said Len Lauer, Sprint's chief operating officer.

Today's innovation forum is just one reason it is a particularly busy time at Sprint's Kansas City area operation this week. On Friday, Gary Forsee, Sprint's president and chief executive officer, will join Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius and Missouri Gov. Matt Blunt in leading a summit focusing on regional economic development issues.

Forsee announced both events last fall as he reassured the region that Sprint remains committed to the Kansas City area.

The company moved its corporate headquarters to Reston, Va., last year after its merger with **Nextel Communications Inc.** Sprint, however, continues to be a major economic force in this region with a Kansas City area work force of about 16,000, which makes it the area's largest private employer.

Sprint has already had notable product development partnerships with area companies such as **Garmin Ltd.**, the Olathe-based location technology manufacturer, and **Handmark Inc.**, a Kansas City firm specializing in packaging information and entertainment software for use on mobile phones and other portable devices.

After reviewing the list of companies participating in the innovation forum, Sprint executives are optimistic about the potential for successful projects with other local companies, Lauer said.

"I don't think we have done a good enough job of reaching out to the Kansas City community to explain our strategy," Lauer said.

Kansas City area startups often struggle to attract venture capital, so Sprint's announcement that it will consider making investments as part of this innovation strategy has created a buzz.

Much of the \$50 million to \$100 million that Sprint will devote annually to innovation will go to internal projects. These teams will have streamlined access to financing so they don't have to prepare a complete business case and win support for developing or testing a new service.

Some of this money, though, could also be spent outside the company, Lauer said.

If a company with a promising technology needs additional capital for expansion so it can work with a partner of Sprint's scale, Sprint might make an investment, Lauer said. Although it wasn't part of the innovation project, Sprint recently made an additional \$10 million investment in **IP Wireless**, a California company with technology that Sprint is using in a trial project in the Washington, D.C., area.

The **Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce** worked with Sprint to identify and screen participants for the innovation forum.

"We wanted to help Sprint flush out these great innovative technology firms that are out here," said Bob Grant, a senior vice president for business growth at the chamber. "We like to connect people."

Sprint is such a sprawling corporation that some outsiders have had trouble finding the right executive to hear a pitch for a project, Grant said.

The forum will address this by providing an overview of Sprint's key innovation interests, business cards of specific executives, and a packet providing details on how to submit a proposal, Grant said.

"You have got a ticket to the party," Grant said.

Gaining an invitation to the innovation event was helpful, but Nash knows his company will have to prove itself before it can work with Sprint on a technology project.

"It is relationships," Nash said. "They are only going to buy from people that they trust. In order to get in the door, you have to establish yourself as that trustworthy partner."

First glance

■ *Sprint has invited more than 200 Kansas City area firms to attend a forum to see whether they can help develop the next hot wireless service.*

■ *The invitation-only gathering at Sprint's Overland Park campus is part of a drive for innovation by the nation's third-largest wireless carrier.*

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