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## Mobile ATM man scoops SME prize

Sep 26 2011 06:59

Nelisiwe Tshabalala

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THE man behind South Africa's first mobile ATM service has been named Entrepreneur of the Year by small and medium enterprise financier Business Partners and Sanlam.

Marc Sternberg, the founder of Spark ATM Systems, received the accolade for his innovative Cape Town-based business that deploys ATMs to merchants around the country.

"I'm absolutely thrilled (to have won this award). I'm proud of my achievements and those of my team. We view ourselves as an innovative entrepreneurial company and we thought it would be good to benchmark ourselves," says a jubilant Sternberg.

He says he started the business so that any merchant, large or small, could host an ATM and not have to go through the process of approaching a bank. So far, the company has deployed 1 500 ATMs across the country and it continues to install 40 to 50 machines per month. The ATMs are imported fully assembled from a supplier in Korea and then customised as soon as they arrive in South Africa.

The success of his business came in him spotting a gap in the market and capitalising on it. "In the case of Sparks ATM Systems it's really a win-win situation for retailers, himself and the community. He started a new business model that benefits everyone," says executive head of Sanlam Segment Solutions Jan Steenkamp.

The 36-year-old and his business partner Russell Birman started the venture in 2005 by pooling their life savings. They managed to hold on to all the business' equity, something Sternberg encourages other entrepreneurs to do as well. Today the company has a staff contingent of 80, while its revenue has grown 70% in the last three years.

To other aspiring entrepreneurs, Sternberg says: "Go out there and do it. The long-term benefits are worthwhile. It's wonderfully rewarding - also to be able to create jobs in SA is rewarding."

### They were winners too

Winners in the various other categories were equally inspiring.

- The Innovator of the Year award went to Elian Weiner of Epic Communications, who also took home the Emerging Entrepreneur of the Year award for his PR firm, which posted a turnover of more than R10m after only two-and-a-half years.
- Job Creator of the Year was awarded to Pierre Conradie of Alpha Group, a security firm which now employs 1 200 people in rural KwaZulu-Natal.
- The winner of the Medium Entrepreneur was Troy Carelse of Foaming Concepts, whose company supplies foam to other companies and has a turnover of over R60m.
- In the category of Small Entrepreneur, Lennin Marule was the winner for his firm Marule Family Trust.

These entrepreneurs were selected not only for their business acumen, but also for their passion for their businesses. The overarching impression of the winners was their energy, will to succeed and inner belief, says Steenkamp.

"Entrepreneurs are so crucial for our country - they employ 60% to 70% of the labour force. We want to celebrate them and put them on a pedestal, but also for them to act as encouragement to other entrepreneurs and help them take that step into the industry," Steenkamp says.

Every year hundreds of businesses apply for the competition, but only a select few are chosen for the finals. Since its inception, the awards have attracted a wide range of applicants of an impressive calibre and this year was no exception.

"Despite depressed economic conditions, there's still a vibe out there and entrepreneurs are making it. Having spoken to the judges they feel the quality of this year's entrants was higher and there was a diversity of people from all walks of life," says executive director of Business Partners Christo Botes, who has been involved in the awards for 23 years.

Says Botes: "We welcome anyone who would like to enter. It's good for your business to reflect on what you've done and your impact on the market. It's a good tool to measure yourself against, and also to measure yourself against other entrepreneurs."

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