

SEEDS FOR GROWTH

Contestant Guide — Your Pitch, the Format, and How You'll Be Judged

Presented by One South Euclid in partnership with Huntington Bank and Heights-Hillcrest Regional Chambers of Commerce

Welcome, Contestants

Welcome to Seeds for Growth. This guide tells you everything you need to prepare: how the event runs, what your pitch must cover, and exactly how the judges will score you. The scoring rubric is published in advance to show you exactly what the judges will be looking for. The contestants who do best are the ones who build their pitch around it.

The prizes

- First Place: \$1,000 • Second Place: \$750 • Third Place: \$500
- Wild Card: a free social media support package (content creation, setup, and promotion), awarded to a non-winning contestant whose story shows exceptional promise — chosen by judges' nomination and audience vote.

4 winners will be chosen (one for each prize), in total. However, each pitch will be judged according to its most appropriate category: New business/raw pitch, Existing/emerging business, or Community impact organization/social enterprise. Winners agree to a brief 6-month check-in with the One South Euclid & Chamber and to reasonable publicity (photos, announcements). One South Euclid may withhold a prize if eligibility or conduct requirements are not met.

How to enter

Enter online, using the entry form found here: <https://forms.gle/ahgCpeviJUFV6Vr76>. Follow the instructions listed on the page.

Please note, contestants are limited to businesses located in or serving the City of South Euclid community.

The Pitch Format

- **5-minute pitch, strictly timed.** You have exactly 5 minutes. A timekeeper will give you a 1-minute warning, and your pitch stops at 5:00 whether you're finished or not. Practice with a timer — running over is one of the most common and most avoidable ways to lose points.
- **3 minutes of judges' Q&A.** Immediately after your pitch, judges will ask questions. Answer directly. "I don't know yet, but here's how I'd find out" is a respectable answer; dodging is not.
- **Slides are optional (max 10).** You may use up to 10 slides, but you don't have to. A clear pitch with no slides beats a cluttered pitch with ten. If you demo a product, it must be set up in under 30 seconds. You may hand printed materials to the judges.
- **Live, in front of an audience.** You'll pitch live, before the judging panel and an audience. Judges score independently during and immediately after your pitch.

Five questions every pitch must answer

Whatever your category, build your five minutes around these:

1. **What need or challenge inspired your business**, and what evidence have you seen that customers want your product or service?
2. **Who are your customers?** Describe the people or businesses you serve.
3. **What makes your business stand out?** Explain why customers choose you instead of another option.
4. **How does your business make money?** Explain how you earn revenue and how your business is financially sustainable.
5. **How would you use the prize money?** Tell us exactly how you would invest the funds and what results you expect to achieve.

How You'll Be Judged

A panel of five judges scores every pitch on a printed rubric: five criteria, each rated 1–5 and weighted to a 100-point total. Judges score independently — they don't discuss scores until every pitch in your category is finished. Your category's champion is the highest total score.

Each category has its own rubric, built for its stage. Idea-stage founders are not scored on revenue history, and operating businesses can't win on enthusiasm alone. Find your category below and study the right-hand column — it tells you what the judges are listening for.

Category A — New Business / Raw Pitch

For ventures at the idea or pre-revenue stage. No sales history required.

Criterion	Points	What the judges are listening for
Problem & Opportunity	20	Name a real problem and the specific people who have it. Show us how you know it's real — research, conversations with potential customers, or your own firsthand experience. “Everyone needs this” is a red flag; “here's who needs it and how I know” is a strength.
Solution & Differentiation	25	Explain what you'll offer and why someone would choose it over what already exists. Judges know there are alternatives — including “doing nothing.” Naming your competition and explaining your edge scores far better than pretending you have none. This is the most heavily weighted criterion in your category.
Feasibility & Founder Readiness	20	Walk us through your realistic first steps to launch, and tell us why you are the right person to do this — your skills, experience, or the partners you've lined up.
Path to Revenue	15	Who pays, how much, and how will you land your first customers? Acknowledge what it will cost to get started. You don't need a five-year financial model — you need a believable first dollar.
Pitch Delivery & Clarity	20	Be organized, stay in time, and answer questions directly. The test: could a judge accurately retell your idea to someone else afterward?

Category B — Existing / Emerging Business

For businesses currently operating with some sales history (guideline: 6 months to 5 years).

Criterion	Points	What the judges are listening for
Traction & Proof	25	Show concrete evidence your business works: revenue, customer counts, repeat business, a growth trend. Real numbers — even modest ones — beat big adjectives. This is one of your two most heavily weighted criteria.
Growth Plan & Use of Funds	25	Tell us exactly what you would do with the prize money and what measurable result it would produce — a piece of equipment, a hire, a marketing push, added capacity. “\$5,000 buys X, which lets us do Y” is the strongest sentence in your pitch. Equally weighted with Traction.

Criterion	Points	What the judges are listening for
Market Position & Differentiation	15	Show that you know your customers and your competitors, and give us the defensible reason customers choose you.
Financial Health & Viability	20	Know your numbers. Judges will ask about revenue, margins, and costs — owners who can answer without checking notes stand out immediately.
Pitch Delivery & Clarity	15	Be organized, stay in time, and answer questions directly. The test: could a judge accurately retell your business story to someone else afterward?

Category C — Community Impact / Social Enterprise

For nonprofits, social enterprises, and community initiatives whose primary measure of success is community benefit rather than profit.

Criterion	Points	What the judges are listening for
Need & Target Population	20	Define the local need with evidence, and be specific about who you serve. “Families in the two zip codes around our center” is stronger than “the community.”
Impact Model & Measurability	25	Connect what you do to the outcome it creates, and tell us how you'll know it's working — even a simple measure counts (meals served, students placed, hours donated). Good intentions without a mechanism score low. This is your most heavily weighted criterion.
Sustainability	20	Show how the work continues after the prize money is spent: earned income, grants, sponsors, memberships, or some mix. Reliance on a single uncertain source is the most common weakness in this category.
Community Engagement & Partnerships	15	Demonstrate buy-in: partners already committed, volunteers, letters of support, or evidence that the people you serve helped shape the program.
Pitch Delivery & Clarity	20	Be organized, stay in time, and answer questions directly. The test: could a judge accurately retell your mission and model to someone else afterward?

Advice From the Judges' Side of the Table

- **Practice out loud, timed, at least five times.** If your pitch delivery is worth 15–20 points and you've never rehearsed out loud, you're leaving free points on the table. Rehearse to a person, not a mirror, and have them retell your idea back to you — that's the actual test judges apply.
- **Be specific everywhere.** One vivid, specific detail — a real customer, a real number, a real moment — does more work than five generalities. Judges hear “huge market” and “passionate team” all day; they remember “our first customer drove 40 minutes and bought out our stock.”
- **Own your weaknesses before the judges find them.** Naming your competitors and your plan's risks makes you more credible, not less. Judges will find the weakness in Q&A anyway; the strong move is getting there first.
- **Know your use-of-funds sentence cold.** Every contestant should be able to say, in one sentence, what the prize buys and what changes because of it. This matters most in Category B, where it's worth 25 points — but judges in every category are ranking finalists on who will do the most with the money.
- **Treat Q&A as part of the pitch.** Q&A is scored as part of Pitch Delivery, and it's where judges separate contestants who know their business from contestants who memorized a script. Anticipate the three hardest questions you could be asked and prepare honest answers.
- **You leave with more than a score.** Every contestant receives written feedback from the panel — at least one strength and one constructive suggestion. Many past pitch-contest participants say the feedback, the exposure, and the connections outlasted the prize money.

Checklist before event day

- Pitch rehearsed and reliably under 5:00
- Slides (if using) submitted by the published deadline, 10 or fewer
- Your numbers — prices, costs, revenue, key stats — memorized, not read
- One-sentence use-of-funds statement ready
- Answers prepared for your three hardest questions
- Arrival time, venue, and A/V needs confirmed with the Chamber