Health Solutions Lead List of Finalists
Entrepreneurs From Across Asia Seek New Ways in Tackling the Region’s Well-Being and Economic Challenges

BY JURO OSAWA

Finding solutions to health-related problems and empowering people and communities in emerging economies are the broad themes for many of this year’s finalists in The Wall Street Journal’s annual Asian Innovation Awards.

Those themes also were prominent among the more than 240 applications the Journal received this year. A team of Journal editors narrowed the pool to 52, and an independent panel of judges from the private sector and academia worked with the editors to further trim the number to 12 finalists.

The judges will choose the winners, which will be announced in November. The applications will be primarily judged on creativity or degree of innovation, quality of execution and potential impact on quality of life or productivity.

Finalists focusing on health and well-being address a broad range of issues. Hong Kong-based Clicom Technology Ltd. has created a disposable adult diaper that can measure wetness and allow caregivers to monitor the condition using wireless technology. Researchers at Singapore-based Clearbridge BioMedics Pte. have developed new biochip technology that helps isolate rare tumor cells from blood.

The Journal received entries from all corners of Asia. Three of this year’s 12 finalists are from India, while another three come from Singapore and Australia. The finalists take diverse approaches to the problems they are trying to solve. For some, inspiration comes from the unique challenges facing their countries.

From Pakistan, a social enterprise called Naya Jeevan has developed what it describes as a “health plan for the marginalized,” providing low-income families in emerging economies with affordable access to catastrophic health care.

Another social enterprise that tries to improve the lives of people in emerging economies is RuralShores Business Services from India, an outsourcing company for back-office operations that set up centers in rural villages in an attempt to provide young people with sustainable employment.

Another finalist from India, a new mobile-texting technology called Panini Keypad, allows users to type in all the major languages in India as well as some foreign languages, seeking to bridge the countries’ linguistic communities. From the Philippines, the Hapinoy Store Program offers micro-financing to small neighborhood convenience stores called “sari-sari”—Filipino for “various kinds”—while also providing women entrepreneurs with opportunities.

Two finalists are focusing on challenges facing visually impaired people. One of them, Young India Fellowship Programme, has developed viSpars, a belt-like device worn around the waist that detects obstacles ahead and sends vibrations, enabling the user to determine the direction and proximity of the obstacle. Its name merges “vision” and “sparsh,” which means “touch” in Hindi.

Another product, Talking TV from Hong Kong-based Ocean Blue Software (HBO) Ltd., enables people with eyesight problems to have a better TV viewing experience. A set-top box talks viewers through TV program guides and menu items.

In Singapore, A*STAR Institute of Materials Research and Engineering has developed flexible material that remains soft under normal conditions but hardens upon impact. The material can be used in many areas such as sports, industrial safety and packaging, the firm says.

From Australia, RightShip Pty., has developed an online system for rating the environmental efficiency of ships. The system uses a database updated daily and an algorithm for measuring energy efficiency.

Another technology targeting consumers is a Singapore-based start-up called Viki, which has created a social video-streaming site. It allows viewers to translate TV shows and movies into other languages.

In the coming weeks, we will feature the 12 finalists before announcing the AIA winners as well as the Technopreneur of the Year, which honors an entry that best applies technology with the greatest potential for commercial success.

Credit Suisse sponsors the awards. The judges are selected by journalists at The Wall Street Journal, and coverage of the event and its winners is the sole responsibility of the Journal’s news department.