

Some Typical Questions that Judges Ask Teams after they pitch their startup:

1. How well do you explain the problem and solution behind your business?

For the problem how well do you understand the needs and/or challenges your customers face and the economic or other consequences associated with these challenges.

For the solution what are you doing to change the world and why will your service/product be vastly better than anyone else's. What's the pain you alleviate and/or your value proposition.

The answers to both should be simple enough that even my 90-year old mother can understand you

2. Customer Discovery

How well do you know your target customer/market? Have you gotten beyond the hypotheses and hunches through meaningful direct interaction with your target audience to get more qualitative information, facts & data. If you're relying only on market surveys or analysts' reports from the Internet, then you really haven't done what's required to build a successful business.

3. Bottom up sales & revenue forecast – Bottom up vs. Top down

Please, please, please don't forecast revenue based on some market share of an aggregate market that you obtained from an analyst's report (top down approach). The best approach is a bottom up forecast, where on a customer-by-customer basis you're realistically determining how many clients you can acquire within a specific time based on your sales model.

4. Why is your business going to matter in 10 years?

Over the years very few have taken a stab at this, but when they do it's impressive. This requires being a visionary and the ability to look at your customers/market and determine where they're headed in the future and explain how your business will adapt to these changes. Although this is hard to predict, it's still very impressive when someone makes the effort to do it.

Look for our Introduction to judges postings on IG that start this week. You will be introduced to the eight judges and they will share their responses to other questions.

5. What qualities make a winning pitch stand out from the rest?

For me, a winning pitch is threefold. First, the presenter must be passionate about their project. Second, the opportunity must be unique or reflect a new take on something. Lastly, the presenter must present the necessary information in a clear and concise manner to give the

potential investor an understanding of the product / service and the potential market. The necessary information is: (1) What is the problem the product / service is trying to solve / address and how does the product / service solve / address it?; (2) What is the market size?; and (3) how does the product / service make money / what is the business model?

6. What's one trait that separates successful founders from the rest?

Founder's perseverance is probably the trait that separates successful founders from the rest because the startup journey is a torturous path, and you die at least 4 times or more before you see light at the end of tunnel. So, if you can persevere the exponential level of stress, eternal optimism in the face of daily existential crisis, and still manage to move your dream forward, you will be successful.

7. What's one thing you hope to see from this year's competition?

Energy! Bring your startup story to life!

NOTE: This is where Ebony Utley, who will come to the AI to do a session on Storytelling, will help student teams prepare for their pitches. This is an important skill that everyone should master, whether you are pitching in the SIC or pitching yourself and your skills in a job interview!

8. What's one thing every student entrepreneur should focus on before stepping on stage to pitch?

Before stepping on stage, focus on the problem, not just the solution. A meaningful solution can only come from a meaningful problem.

9. What Judges (& Investors) Look for in a Startup Team

- **Passion that's Contagious**
Investors want to see fire in your eyes—the kind of passion that inspires *both* your team and customers to rally behind your vision. Are you building something that genuinely excites you? They're looking for more than rehearsed enthusiasm—this needs to feel *real*.
- **Grit that Doesn't Quit**
Every startup hits the storm. The question is: will you still be standing (and iterating) when things get rough? Judges look for signs that you've weathered hard moments—or are ready to—and will keep going when Plan A through G fail.
- **Confidence—Not Ego**
Investors like bold, not brash. They want founders who believe in their idea, *but* also know they'll need mentors, advisors, and maybe even a few pivots to succeed. Confident founders ask smart questions and seek feedback; egos shut down the room.

- **Coachability & Self-Awareness**

Can you take advice without getting defensive? Can you admit when you're wrong and change course when the data tells you to? This trait often makes the difference between a one-hit wonder and a resilient, evolving venture.

- **Team Dynamics & Trust**

Are co-founders aligned? Do they complement each other's skills? Investors often ask themselves: *Would I want to work for this team?* If the answer is no, that's a red flag.

- **Execution Energy**

Great ideas are everywhere. Investors want to know: *Can this team execute?* They're looking for a track record of action, progress, or momentum—even small wins show you're not just dreaming, you're building.