

**A New Angle**

**Episode 125**

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**Justin Angle** This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

**Justin Angle** Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today I am speaking with Andrew Schulz, the community manager for C2M Beta. C2M Beta is an open innovation lab supported by Blackfoot Communications, one of the title sponsors of this program.

**Andrew Schulz** This is Blackfoots testament to keeping rural communities alive, not only keeping them alive, but helping them grow by leaps and bounds.

**Justin Angle** C2M Beta offers a curriculum and a collection of resources designed to help entrepreneurs in Montana bring their ideas to life.

**Justin Angle** Andrew, thanks for coming on the show.

**Andrew Schulz** Justin, thanks for having me. I'm really excited to be here.

**Justin Angle** So tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

**Andrew Schulz** I grew up in the southern Bitterroot Valley. Born in Hamilton, Montana, and raised in Darby. And my parents, I would say one of their core features of my childhood was adventure. They left everyone they knew from the Midwest and moved out to Montana before I was born with the idea to be entrepreneurs themselves. They're, my dad's family were dairy farmers, and he said, gosh I just yearn for the mountains, and so did my mom. And so in the early 80s, before I was born, they moved out here and actually started a pellet mill in Darby, Montana. So I grew up driving a forklift and being raised with that spirit of entrepreneurship.

**Justin Angle** Super, and somehow you ended up in my principles marketing class years ago. How did you make your way to the University of Montana?

**Andrew Schulz** Very wiggly path. Nontraditional student.

**Justin Angle** Yeah.

**Andrew Schulz** I actually spent 13 years splitting my summers and winters. Summers guiding sport fishing in southeast Alaska, I am still a certified U.S. Coast Guard captain, and I still love the Indigenous people of southeast Alaska, the Tlingit, Haida. And in the winter times, I designed and built terrain parks at one of the local ski areas, Lost Trail, which funnily enough got me started with not only my career in Alaska, but with my marketing career as well.

**Justin Angle** Well, we're here today to talk about C2M Beta. First of all, what is C2M Beta? Why are we talking about it today?

**Andrew Schulz** So C2M Beta was founded in the spring of 2018 to accelerate individuals and entrepreneurs and to really support the private sector for the rapidly growing technology, but also entrepreneurial base that really is a large majority of the Montana business ecosystem, entrepreneurs and solopreneur. So C2M Beta connects individuals to more resources, to more opportunities, to the ability to grow and to the people to help them achieve those growth goals.

**Justin Angle** Okay. So Blackfoot is a telecommunications company, kind of its origin story is in laying cable up into rural communities. Why is this in the interest of a telecom company to sort of launch a tech incubator like this?

**Andrew Schulz** Well, you kind of hit the nail on the head speaking about the inception of Blackfoot. Over five years ago when we created C2M Beta, the CEO, Jason Williams, stated that they're hoping that C2M Beta will become a platform for Blackfoot and other telecommunications providers to play a larger role in growing the regional technology economy, as well as engaging with businesses to develop products and services that can be delivered over the top of their robust telecommunications network.

**Justin Angle** And so incubator is a term I mean, you might even call it a buzzword, it's something we hear in the technology space often. I mean, what is it for somebody who doesn't work in this space, how do you understand the concept of an incubator and what does it actually do?

**Andrew Schulz** In one word, we could say fast track. In 12 weeks, we have developed a curriculum to help John or Jill off the street with an idea, take that idea and further validate it so that they understand if the opportunity actually exists or not. Because one of the main things that we've seen coming out of C2M Beta is the ability for early

stage entrepreneurs or individuals to assess the validity of their business, to say this is worth putting a mortgage on my home or getting a bank loan, or asking my aunts, uncles or friends, families and fools, as they always live to say on an early stage investment perspective.

**Justin Angle** Sure.

**Andrew Schulz** To really take this idea, product, business or service to market. And that's basically what the accelerator or incubator process is, is taking years worth of information and concepts and hands on training and consolidating it into a focused, intense process where at the end the people either come out more fully refined or they are ready to pivot with a new idea that they've further developed and validated through the process or invalidated the idea and said, what's the next best thing? Because what we've identified again is leaning into those no's helps early stage entrepreneurs get to the yes in the early stages of business investors and other people in the ecosystem bet on the entrepreneur just as much as they bet on that business idea. C2M Beta helps people build a stronger foundation, no matter if they continue with the original focus or they pivot to the left or the right.

**Justin Angle** Sure. And you mentioned that the program is 12 weeks. You select cohorts. Like walk us through the curriculum. What do enrollees experience over those 12 weeks?

**Andrew Schulz** The beginning of the program starts out with a meet and greet and really lets myself and the team pattern match what sort of assistance you're going to need or that we've identified that's going to help you get to the next stage. From there, we dive into the about workshop, all about you, about you, your vision, your company. And we really help disseminate what makes you special and maybe helps you identify the holes or gaps in your team that you need to fill to really make this idea come to life. From there we go into an idea validation module. It starts out with researching your idea and really introducing you to our core concept. And here's the meat and potatoes of C2M Beta, and this is the special sauce, we build a framework for your idea around something called P-CAUSE. P-CAUSE stands for the problem, the customer, the audience, the unique value proposition and the solution. And you notice that we start with the problem because at C2M Beta, what we've identified is if we can help identify problems earlier on and build product services or startups, focus on alleviating problems, they have a higher likelihood to succeed. So identify the problem and then the customer. The customer is who in your ecosystem is interested or willing to engage with your product, service or market. And typically, this is a large amount of people.

Everyone that's a human could be a customer of your product. Well, obviously that's not going to work. So then we zero in on your audience and inside of audience, people that are actually willing to pay for your product or service. We drill into what's called TAM and SAM, and there's these acronyms, as you know, in the business world, go on for days. But TAM is total addressable market, meaning people that are actually willing to engage with your service, that you can talk to, that have willingness to pay and they're willing to engage with you. Versus SAM, serviceable addressable market, that's an even smaller group of people that, you know you can service, meaning if you, you know, build a product or service, you can't do it for 100,000 people if there's two employees. So you can actually only service 50 or 90 customers. So that's your serviceable addressable market. That's the beginning of idea validation. From there we go deeper, refining our pitch and leveraging the P-CAUSE framework to build the beginning of an elevator pitch, we reach out to industry experts to further validate, and then we start really, we start helping build an idea validation, outreach evidence plan to first use social media or in-person polls or posts to then have in-person interviews and really, really refine if this is a valid idea or not.

**Justin Angle** Andrew, before we move into the next phase of the curriculum, just pull the lens out and you've seen a lot of folks come through the program in these five years. We're talking about idea validation. What are some hallmarks of good ideas?

What are some themes that you've seen across the ideas that you would judge as good? And then on the flip side, what are some pitfalls that you see as far as common mistakes that emerge during this idea validation phase?

**Andrew Schulz** Good ideas that we validated over the last five years? The common thread typically is that the entrepreneur one really understands this problem, or typically the entrepreneur actually experiences the problem themselves, right? If you have such a clear understanding of the issue and not only you have an understanding of it, but you suffer, you pain and just, you know, mire yourself in that issue, you typically are going to succeed because your idea has probably already been validated by you 30, 50, 100 times. And it's more the framework that you get to then plug in the inputs to then create the outputs, right? Happy customers that are alleviating the pain that you're experiencing as well. When I think of a couple standout cohorts going back to the beginning, Patient One, these were a group of individuals that that worked in the medical field or were practicing doctors themselves, and they were developing a telehealth program. And it's still the measure of success in this case five years later, which statistically, what do they say? 60, 70% of companies don't exist for over five years. Patient One is still existing, trying to help provide telehealth services to patients, so them having a very clear understanding of the problem being medical providers themselves, right, they didn't have enough time to service every person in the



community that had issues and they knew that the gap for some people was actually coming into the office. So by alleviating that issue, they were able to then create a really robust solution. That's a really good example of a past cohort understanding the problem and being mired in it. But I would say one of the common threads, and this is for all entrepreneurs that I've talked to, even outside of C2M Beta, it's the want to address all the issues. It's having too big of a mission or a vision that there are not clear enough steps or a phased approach. And so by having too big of a problem to solve, that has too many variables, that's where I have seen some past core participants struggle. And what's interesting enough, though, that's where we've actually helped entrepreneurs say, gosh, you're solving 7 or 10 problems here. Let's further validate which of these 7 to 10 problems people one, are more willing to pay for and two, actually solve a bigger problem. And through that process, we've helped them actually harrow down, instead of solving 7 to 10 problems, we're going to solve these 1 or 2 and solve them better than anyone else in the market and then build on that foundation again.

**Justin Angle** So the program is approaching its fifth year anniversary. Give us, you mentioned Patient One, give us some of the other sort of success stories of the program. What are some of the businesses that, the ventures that, the listeners might recognize that have come through the program?

**Andrew Schulz** You know what? Go Griz, because the first person I'm going to mention is a Griz alum, Chase Bartlett. And the company originally, right, was Bridgeable. And he has actually taken Bridgeable and parlayed it and pivoted it into a new company called Match Coach. And Chase is taking the coaching world by storm, working with some of the largest collegiate teams across the country. And he you know, he's an all-American tennis player, former D-1 assistant coach and founded Match Coach to help great tennis coaching be accessible to players anywhere, everywhere and provide this work from home option. So he's one of my standouts. His ability to first synthesize the information, but then also really leverage it and go. Another standout that I have to just, she's incredible, she's actually an active member of the C2M Beta community now, which is Alli DePuy and her technology, Inspired Classroom. It is a online LMS, learning management system, and platform that she can use across the board for early stage educators, middle school, high school. She works with the MPG Ranch to do outdoor education, but we've actually leveraged her technology and it is now the curriculum that the C2M Beta participants use to digest the 12 weeks worth of content. Those two are incredible. Obviously, there's so many more. I think Michelle Huie with ShotDot, Taylor Heinecke with BLOCKY, the Ayoa scheduling app team, that's one of our recent core participants. Jay Getten here in Belgrade was Behavioral Health Consulting Solutions. And then just one last one that I'll mention, Brian Elliott, of 406

Bovine, he's down in Texas and he's from Billings, Montana. And this gentleman was out in the feedlot, he's a cowboy, he raises cattle for a living. And he was on his phone looking at the cattle as they came in. And I don't know if you knew this, but all that separates a high premium grade-A Angus, you know, black Angus from a low grade Angus is that tag in their ear. And if they come back to the trailer and that tag is gone, well, you're no longer the high dollar steer, you're a low dollar steer.

**Justin Angle** Interesting.

**Andrew Schulz** And this guy, Brian, at this phone in his hand said, gosh, there must be a better way. And through C2M Beta, he developed the first facial recognition cattle identification app. I think over the last five years with this fall cohort that graduates December 12th, 2023, we'll have helped almost 40 entrepreneurs and individuals either bring ideas to life, further accelerate business ideas or bring ideas and pivot them for additional business scalability and success.

**Justin Angle** We'll be back to my conversation with Andrew Schultz after this short break.

**Justin Angle** Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Andrew Schulz about C2M Beta, an open innovation lab supported by Blackfoot Communication.

**Justin Angle** So, Andrew, take a moment to kind of I don't know if it's necessarily dispel a misnomer, but, you know, I think programs like C2M Beta or, you know, we've had a variety of, you know, investors, various types of investors or people that do different things to support the entrepreneurial community in Montana. There often appears to be a bias toward technology ventures. But I think that's a bit of a stereotype. You know, the ventures you're describing all use technology in a variety of ways, but, you know, in the agricultural space, in the education space, in a variety of different spaces. So I think the notion of a tech startup is a little bit misguided. I mean, any venture, whether it is, you know, a rural retail establishment or a software application, needs to harness technology. Talk about the role of technology. And would you describe your participants as tech companies? How do you kind of think about that?

**Andrew Schulz** From the beginning I think the team at Blackfoot and C2M Beta together identified that it's not tech focused companies that build up the majority of Montana and Northwestern ecosystems. It is individuals and entrepreneurs with, like you said, manufacturing, agricultural, educational and medical. Across the board at

C2M Beta, having this curriculum built that can really take any person from any different kind of walk of life and give them the tools to compete on the same level as everyone else, that's where the technology comes in, right? That's where not even the technology to say, hey, you need to go use Shopify now to sell your product online, that sure is a piece of it, but it's more about saying here is how you can adopt the mindset, a growth driven mindset as a business owner, even if you own a gas station on the corner of Arlee, Montana. Here's how you can help that community by actually increasing your ability to communicate with that community, leveraging technology or offer better products and services. So many of these companies come in with, hey, I don't know anything about technology. But then as we start working with them, they themselves identify, gosh, we're using technology every day. They're experts in their own little ecosystem. And by augmenting their ability to really perform, by either adding additional tech stack tools or just again giving them that growth mindset to say, well, what about this? Or how could I be better at that? Based on another cohort participants feedback or what they've learned in the program that helps them gain competitive edge and in turn helps that community which we're trying to serve.

**Justin Angle** Talk a little bit about how equity plays out and does it play out in cohort selection? Do you try to select from, you try to optimize diversity on certain variables?

How are you trying to spread this opportunity around so that it is, it maximizes representation?

**Andrew Schulz** First of all, C2M Beta is completely equity free, it's fee free, it is completely free for startups. And that is the number one barrier to entry for underserved individuals to gain access to these sorts of resources. And so that is Blackfoot and C2M Beta's line in the sand, saying anyone, especially underserved individuals, deserve access to content and collateral like this. And that's why this program is completely free. Secondly, we always are focused on bringing in obviously diverse and interesting individuals from all walks of life. And we love and we focus on having female entrepreneurs because we know and this comes from the earliest days, we really try to have outreach in our Indigenous areas as well in Montana for the Blackfoot Nation for the Salish Kootenai. And we are proud to have worked with Genevieve de Alva King of Origins Curriculum back in the 2022 spring. So she had an in-person early childhood education classroom. I think she had four different schools throughout Missoula and the Blackfoot Nation, and she's actually pivoted that and turned it into a full online curriculum. She's in over 20 countries now, helping early childhood educators create a better system for teaching our youngest children of the world. So across the board, we've tried to make it equitable.

**Justin Angle** So in our remaining time, Andrew, let's be fully transparent here. What does Blackfoot gain in this? How does how does Blackfoot sort of realize return on the investment they're making in C2M Beta?

**Andrew Schulz** The number one reason that Blackfoot is doing C2M Beta is to provide the support to the communities that support them in turn. And so to answer your question directly, Blackfoot takes zero ownership stake in any of these companies. Up until now, Blackfoot has never invested in any of these companies. Instead, Blackfoot, just as myself, thinking about the Venn diagram of entrepreneurs, business owners and then investors in the larger community, they have instead played the facilitator role and realize that Blackfoot's role in growing the regional economy is in turn helping business owners progress and develop their businesses to also participate in that economy. Because at the end of the day, if more businesses are growing succeeding, they will be leveraging, obviously buying Blackfoot services to as a telecom provider.

**Justin Angle** Sure.

**Andrew Schulz** But they'll actually be helping solidify a lot of these communities, that with one or two businesses going away, that whole community could go away as well, so this is Blackfoot's testament to keeping rural communities alive, not only keeping

them alive, but helping them grow by leaps and bounds. So long story short, zero equity, zero investment. But we are always excited to find that maybe unicorn, right? And that's what everyone's hunting for. But we know the realistic nature of business is long term support, very sustainable support that is consistent, that business owners and individuals know exists. Because right now in Montana or in the Northwest, if you have a good idea, what do you do with it?

**Justin Angle** Right.

**Andrew Schulz** And so many people struggle and so many people are working two or three jobs, helping their parents, helping their children, and they don't know that C2M Beta exists to help them take that killer idea and get it out of your kitchen, get it out of your garage and get it in front of the larger audience, which is the Northwest and frankly, the world. And that could help you become the next success story for the Northwest or Montana, which will in turn help Blackfoot and everyone else in this ecosystem succeed as well.

**Justin Angle** What would you consider to be a good fit participant in C2M Beta?



**Andrew Schulz** Number one, focus is grit. If someone comes into C2M Beta and they are just scrappy, that helps so much. I think of Jessica Ray of KidsPod, who was one of our last core participants. Her husband is a dentist and they work for the military. They were in Italy and she would have to come to the Tuesday night calls at 11 or midnight at night, Italy time to make it fit for 4 p.m. Mountain Standard. And I think the grit for all these entrepreneurs is the number one thing that's going to help you succeed, whether in C2M Beta or not. The number two thing is the ability to not only take criticism, but really know yourself so clearly that if we get to a point where a hard stop has been flagged, your ego and your personality don't get in the way of your business growing. Acknowledging that and potential really hard statement, hey, this is a bad idea, and instead being able to ingest that with the growth mindset to say, okay, let's pivot left. I love that input. Let's take it, oh it didn't feel good, but let's take it and go left and evolve the next thing. And so that and that's so much easier said than done because you build something and you're proud of it and it's it's a part of you. And if the larger ecosystem invalidates it, your ability to swallow that, take that time investment, potential monetary investment and then turn left, that's a really, really hard thing to do. But that's what a successful entrepreneur has to be able to at least understand. That's what it will take.

**Justin Angle** Super. Yeah. And you have a showcase coming up on December 12th.

Tell us about the showcase. What's that all about?

**Andrew Schulz** The showcase event is the culmination of 12 weeks of hard work and focus week on week, working with mentors, talking to, talking to the other co participants, culminating in a live pitch event. And obviously the closest thing that you listeners can think of is Shark Tank, without the investment. Obviously, if you want to walk up to an entrepreneur and say, hey here's 20 bucks, that's a great idea. They might give you a conversation, I don't think they'll give you a percentage of their company. That being said, showcase happens December 12th. Doors open at 4, the pitches start at 5 and each cohort participant gets 6 to 8 minutes to tell you about their idea, right. Who this entrepreneur is, what the idea is, what stage their business is at and what their next steps are.

**Justin Angle** And final question, Andrew, is for listeners interested in learning more about C2M Beta, or signing up themselves, where would you point them online?

**Andrew Schulz** Yeah. Yeah. So if you're interested in joining C2M Beta, if you have a great idea, if your mom or dad has a great idea, go to [c2mbeta.com](http://c2mbeta.com) and apply now. Our applications are rolling. We accept cohorts twice a year, up to six for this 12 week

program. So go to [c2mbeta.com](http://c2mbeta.com), apply now, and better yet, if you don't want to apply, there's a "let's chat" button as well which actually gives you access to communicate with me or my team directly to help you further understand the opportunity and to hopefully bring your great idea to life.

**Justin Angle** Awesome. Well, Andrew, it's not only fun to just sort of see you off doing great things with your UM education, but also just to learn about this cool opportunity for entrepreneurs and business folks throughout Montana. Thanks for telling us about it and best of luck on the 12th with the showcase and beyond. Thanks so much, Andrew.

**Andrew Schulz** Thanks for having me. Justin. This is a lot of fun and thank you to everyone out there. I'm excited to meet so many more incredible entrepreneurs and individuals, and I just want to leave everyone with this, Montana is an entrepreneurial-focused state and I am so excited to continue growing that ecosystem with all of your help out there.

**Justin Angle** Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from UM alums Michele and Loren Hansen.

A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business. With additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. Keely Larson is our producer. Ella Hall is our production assistant. VTO Jeff Ament and John Wicks made our music and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot and see you next time.