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From Finance to Customer Acquisition Catalyst SunShot Finalists Compete to Launch Big

May 13, 2015

By Pamela Cargill, Contributor

In January, SunShot competitively selected 17 teams to move forward in the overall Catalyst Prize competition. Each of the teams had 60 days to build a prototype product using the TopCoder platform, a 700,000 member community of software developers managed by Appirio, a San Francisco-based information technology consulting company.

On May 14th 17 finalists who have successfully completed the ideation, business innovation, and prototyping stages of the SunShot Catalyst Contest will publicly demonstrate their products to a panel of judges. Five winners will be eligible for up to \$100,000 each to bring their early stage solutions to market. Audience members will participate by voting live on their favorite business pitches.

Demo Day will take place at [Galvanize](#), 44 Tehama Street, in San Francisco. Members of the public and media are invited to attend but must register in advance. Speakers will include Jenn Gustetic, The White House Assistant Director for Open Innovation, Robert M. Hoehn, Co-Founder and CEO of IdeaScale, the platform used for the ideation stage of the contest, and Chris Redlitz, Managing Partner of Transmedia Capital, who funds early stage companies in the digital media market. SunShot leadership, including Director Minh Le, will be in attendance as well.

The [SunShot Catalyst prize program](#) connects contestants to the tools, prototyping resources through the TopCoder platform, data assets managed by NREL, and resources developed by the Energy Department and its national laboratories to help them bring soft cost solution prototypes to life.

How is Catalyst Different than the SunShot Grant Process?

The Catalyst process was managed like a hackathon, with Catalyst staff traveling the nation to visit tech conferences, solar events, and even the Sfuncube to solicit idea pitches in the form of short videos. The process to receive funding through SunShot up until this time



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was managed more like a traditional grant funding process requiring a letter of intent, rigorous screening, and significant documentation required on behalf of the entity desiring funding. After funding is received, each dollar must be meticulously tracked, generally requiring project management resources unavailable to most start-ups.

The scale of dollar amounts involved in SunShot grant programs efforts is in the hundreds of thousands to millions to fund projects. Catalyst is different because it adopts the private sector tech industry methods of start fast/fail fast supported by smaller efforts, smaller dollar amounts.

Who Are the Competing Companies?

The companies coming into the Catalyst contest are in many stages of their growth. Some are exploring their prototype idea using the platform and resources of the DOE. Some already have operating businesses and are looking for new angles for their products and services.

The overall theme for is exploration of new solutions to lower soft costs. We will look at each entry- who they are, what they are trying to do, a little background on the team and their solution, and the soft cost angle they are trying to tackle through their products.

The Companies and Products

Who: [UtilityAPI](#)

What: Automates utility data acquisition, especially usage, for energy companies.

Background: UtilityAPI is one of the Catalyst program companies already in operation. They have seed funding, a small staff, and customers already using their solution. Co-founders Daniel Roesler and Elena Lucas saw an opportunity to better streamline the Green Button Initiative, which is a method by which distributed energy companies can attain customer utility usage information. Through



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Catalyst, they are pursuing additional UI/UX.

Soft Cost Angle: UtilityAPI wants to better automate interactions with the utility for the deployment of distributed energy resources- solar, storage, etc. – thus better streamlining the sales process and eventually backoffice operations.

Who: Gridmates

What: Bring peer-to-peer energy sharing in the first transactive energy platform to eliminate energy poverty.

Background: PARENT COMPANY, also currently in operation, has launched a donation platform that helps connect communities to fundraising opportunities to help them pay for energy. Through Catalyst, they will launch Gridmeters, a peer-to-peer energy sales platform. This builds on their model for sending donations to help needy individuals and communities pay for energy, it will ostensibly allow for donation of actual kWh. This will require Gridmates to navigate numerous regulatory hurdles of virtual net metering, value of solar debates, and the changing landscape of utility tariffs.

Soft Cost Angle: Could open up new customer segments for solar, especially lower income communities if leveraged well by, say, someone like GRID Alternatives. Has potential to allow for more complex trading and aggregating of residential demand response as solar arrays working in one place can more directly have their output offset use somewhere else at some premium.

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Who: ASES National Solar Tour

What: For over 20 years, the American Solar Energy Society (ASES) has organized their national solar tour of solar homes- a grassroots event that invites individuals living with solar, renewable energy, and other lower-impact living technology to open their homes for a day to the public to let them see and experience and talk to real people who live every day with energy savings



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technologies.

Background: The tour of is one the programs run by ASES, the US chapter of the International Solar Energy Society.

ASES intends to use the resources in the Catalyst program to build modern, more sophisticated web-based tools and resources to help Solar Tour organizers and participating homeowners nationwide easily accessible resources for hosting and promoting local tours of solar homes and businesses.

Soft Cost Angle: With the success of grassroots programs like Solarize to spur interest and purchase in solar, better resources and tools to run the tour could get more people interested in solar outside the marketing and sales cycles of solar companies, potentially reducing customer acquisition costs.

Who: PVBid

What: A learning-engine based cost estimation system for commercial-scale solar installers and developers.

Background: Founder Conner English has been estimating commercial PV projects for several years and got the idea for this product while manually performing many of the tasks the PVBid will automate. PVBid will tie in to accounting software, time tracks, and the bid interface to create a learning engine-driven environment for more accurate development and analysis of bidding projects. The engine will also, in the future, provide business information capabilities in order to drive operational excellence throughout the entire project delivery cycle. Through Catalyst, English and his team are developing their minimum viable product including UI/UX.

Soft Cost Angle: Driving profitability and lowering acquisition costs for commercial projects through creating a feedback loop between operations – what actually happens in the field and why – with estimation in order to increase accuracy.

Who: PVComplete



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What: Comprehensive AutoCAD-integrated solar project design software.

Background: PVComplete currently offers an AutoCAD-integrated set of tool palettes and other automation scripts used to aid in the design of commercial-scale PV systems. The drafting and re-drafting of these systems can add expenses and time to a project lifecycle. Through Catalyst, PVComplete is developing a proposal/bid interface that will link to the AutoCAD-integrated solution they already have on the market.

Soft Cost Angle: PVComplete is focused on reducing the amount of time it takes to complete a commercial PV plan set. They plan to add significant integrated error-checking capabilities that will further increase its value in the installation phase.

Who: PVimpact

What: A platform that helps customers better understand their PV system savings and allows the socialization of PV ownership benefits.

Background: PVImpact is a product pursued by Max Aram's team at Pick My Solar, an LA-based company providing competitive bids from a prospect's regional solar companies. PVImpact wants to help keep customers engaged who buy PV solutions. Many do not understand how solar affects their bill post-installation, and can add additional loads not understanding the relationship between PV system output, their usage, and their savings. Their minimum viable product will help bring together monitoring data, utility rate tariffs and actual usage, and the ability to post aspects of that data on social media.

Soft Cost Angle: Higher-value customer acquisition through direct engagement will be the benefits of real PV systems and real PV system owners. Also will help existing companies reduce their customer support costs by helping customers stay engaged with understanding how their system works.

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Who: Savenia Solar Ratings

What: Savenia, a DC-area lab, has already developed an “Energy-Star-like” rating systems for countertop appliances to help consumers better understand the full lifecycle cost of operating small appliances. They are taking the same approach to their development of a ratings system for

Soft Cost Angle: Reducing customer acquisition costs through education.

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Who: Simplify Solar

What: A comprehensive online platform and offering a totally automated PV buying experience.

Background: Simplify already has a website up and running, had invested in their brand, and demonstrated a clear understanding of the industry’s problems in their introductory video. Two Southern-California-based software developers founded the venture. Much like Sungevity, they want to sell sunshine online. The biggest difference between Simplify and Sungevity is that Simplify wants to provide an entirely automated and customer-driven platform to do so through. Simplify outlined challenging and visionary goals in their Catalyst pitch video including creating tools customers or other non-experts could use to conduct their own site visit and create their own design.

Soft Cost Angle: A total value-chain approach to reducing soft costs, especially in customer acquisition. They plan to partner with installers when the platform is ready.

Who: SolarAgs PV App

What: Customizes, autonomizes, and optimizes residential PV leads generation and system design.

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Background: A team at Texas A&M plus a balance-of-systems expert from the former SolarBridge is behind this project. Using the app, the prospect would take a photo of their house from the road and step through a process in the app to interview them about their wants and needs. Meanwhile, algorithms, already under development by this team, will work on developing the system design. The team is pursuing UI and other improvement on their prototype through the Catalyst program.

Soft Cost Angle: Remove site evaluation and multiple visits from solar salespersons.

Who: Solar Power Report

What: Your independent guide to solar.

Background: This concept is driven by a team of experienced investigate journalists, many of whom have covered solar and renewable energy, and led by Matthias Krause (ex-Photon). Instead of automated marketing platforms for lead generation, Krause's team wants to solve the problem of the lack of unbiased information and education that can help the curious become prospects without the pitch. They are using TopCoder to help them develop a web application that will compare companies and quotes and initial website so they can launch.

Soft Cost Angle: Education-based customer acquisition.

Who: Solar Retina

What: Providing utilities, regulatory parties, and even solar developers real solar intelligence, from real solar arrays.

Background: Solar Retina is tackling the nexus of big data and utility grid-integration scalability, a huge problem we are already seeing in Hawaii and many other territories across the US. To begin, they plan to crowdsource monitoring data from existing solar homeowners to aggregate into their platform. Then, they plan to make anonymized data available utilities and other users to help

drive better interconnection policies and more targeted and useful solar development – minus the huge interconnection study fees.

Soft Cost Angle: Reduction of interconnection costs and streamlining operations from solar developers and utilities.

Who: Solar Site Design

What: Sells qualified solar energy development prospects to solar equipment manufacturers, suppliers, engineering firms and finance companies.

Background: Founded by long-time solar developer Jason Loyet, Solar Site Design (SSD) aims to empower everyday tradesmen and home services providers to become independent solar sales reps as an adjunct to their business. The platform consist of an app that steps you through a simple residential site evaluation and then connects the results to companies who sign up for leads within that territory. SSD is a good example of a bringing platform-based gig app like Uber or Lyft to the solar industry.

Soft Cost Angle: Reductions of customer acquisition and design-related costs.

Who: Soluxify

What: Web platform connecting solar providers and customers on an easy to use social bidding platform and helps them track their progress throughout all the phases of their collaboration.

Background: The Soluxify team saw opportunity to make the process of going solar much easier and less confusing by providing access to education and competitive bids in a single platform to help prospects turn in to customers. The bid platform field is getting very hot already, with a notable exit already by Sunible (now Domino) and multiple channel partnership announcements from EnergySage, so Soluxify will need a good angle to differentiate.

Soft Cost Angle: Straight up-- customer acquisition and operations streamlining.

Who: Sunmetrix Go

What: Gives consumers a chance to test-drive their solar system before spending a single dollar.

Background: Ozgur Gurtuna got the idea for Sunmetrix Go when he was visiting his car mechanic. His mechanic drove the importance of the test drive. Gurtuna realized he could apply the test drive to different problem- helping people understand what it would be like to have a solar energy system. So far Generaytor [PC1] is the first big mover in this socialized test drive category. The difference with Sunmetrix is it will integrate a customer's actual utility usage via Green Button data and further leverage the OpenPV database of operating systems for benchmarking. Social media sharing features are not high on the list, but may come later in the roadmap.

Soft cost angle: Customer acquisition through try-before-you-buy education.

Who: Sunsight

What: Connects current solar customers with the value of their solar production to their everyday finances.

Background: The goal of the SunSight team is to help solar customers understand how much they are actually saving. Through their app, they will connect realtime production from a customer's PV system with their utility usage via Green Button and their household budgeting software to provide a clearer picture of actual savings. The challenge the Sunsight team will have to clear is how to handle more complex solar ownership transactions like lease and PPAs with escalators and other more non-linear terms.

Soft Cost Angle: Reduced customer support/O&M costs through real-time visibility to PV system production and usage offset.

Who: Tumalow

What: Gives K-12 schools going solar a way to reduce their electric bills at no cost using battery energy storage.

Background: The team behind Tumulow- programmers, solar and storage experts, and a school superintendent- plans to scale the energy storage sector by developing scalable contracts for its deployment using K-12 schools as its pilot. The projects include an added bonus of engaging students to learn about solar energy.

Soft Cost Angle: Scalable 0-down contracts aim to lower customer acquisition of future sites.

Who: Window Street Financial

What: Aligns solar customers seeking financing to mission-driven capital from their favorite institutions.

Background: Coined by two UC Berkeley students, Window Street Financial will bring the growing popularity of impact investments to the funding of residential solar projects. The platform will bring together investments from social and environmental impact endowments to finance residential solar projects. With the prevalence and growth in fossil fuel divestment on behalf of bigger endowments, this idea may be on the crest of the wave. Imagine having investment money from Sierra Club fund your PV system? That's the idea.

Soft Cost Angle: Solar financing. Addresses a segment of the population that may be opposed to currently third-party ownership options because of its ties to large Wall Street corporate banks.

Overall Themes: Customer Acquisition

Customer acquisition was a big focus for Catalyst finalists. However, few solutions suggested how they would ensure their programs delivered not just lower cost customer but also higher-quality customers. Many soft costs solutions coming to the market currently aim to lower the point-source cost of customer acquisition (e.g. a \$500 lead instead of a \$900 lead), but few can speak to how their

programs and services will affect operations and project delivery. A lower-cost lead might not be a “lower cost” customer to support or project to build for many reasons. Companies contracting with solar solutions providers should always ask how the product or service of the solar solutions provider will lower costs not just at the point of acquisition, but maintain the value throughout the line. Like they say in lean manufacturing, value must flow throughout the entire chain.

Keep an eye out for these rising stars of solar services solutions. This is a rapidly growing field in the industry as companies open new markets through cost reductions and policy initiatives and more entrepreneurs see advantages in developing products and services for the industry’s long tail of several thousand (and growing) installers.

Lead image: Competition theme. Credit: Shutterstock.

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