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# Trashbots mission: Reinventing STEM education

## Big names on tech scene help sons of local VC start a company

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No more than a few months away from closing its \$500,000 seed round of funding, Trashbots Inc. already has lined up several high-profile investors.

Founded in 2016 and launched in 2017 by undergraduate brothers Rohit and Sidharth Srinivasan, Trashbots offers a robot-building kit for K-12 students that teaches pupils what Sidharth described as “real-world engineering.” It comes with gadgets such as motors, sensors and a gyroscope that students can use to build things — a fishing pole, for example, or a robot that can kick a ball or make music, Sidharth said.

Trashbots' kit also offers more than 50 hours of curricula, with lesson documents and videos, from which students may learn coding and the high-level programming language Python.

The K-12 robotic toolkits market represented a roughly \$4.4 billion industry in 2019, according to TechNavio, a London-based technology research and advisory company. TechNavio projected that sector to grow to about \$5.2 billion in 2024, according to a February report.



TRASHBOTS

Trashbots mails robot-building kits to K-12 students, complete with gadgets such as motors, sensors and gyroscopes.

Rohit, a junior at the University of Texas at Austin majoring in mechanical engineering, and Sidharth, who just graduated from Westlake High School and has been accepted to Stanford University, were part of Austin accelerator Sputnik ATX's fifth cohort that began last winter.

Investors in the Srinivasans' startup include Silicon Laboratories Inc. (Nasdaq: SLAB) co-founder and Chairman Nav Sook; Joe Aragona, co-founder and general partner of investment firm Austin Ventures; OJO Labs Inc. co-founder and CEO John Berkowitz; and Jillionaire, a Trinidadian DJ whose real name is Christopher Leacock.

Once the round closes, the Srinivasans plan to use the capital to expand the company's inventory and supply chains, invest in marketing and hire additional staff.

Beyond Sputnik ATX accelerator's investment in the business, Rohit said Trashbots also raised about \$31,000 on the crowdfunding platform Indiegogo.

Trashbots currently employs three, including the recent hire of Christopher Strzok as chief operating officer. Strzok comes to Trashbots after more than eight years at the Wisconsin-based STEM Academy, most recently as chief engagement officer.

Hiring will be "need-based as we go forward," Rohit said, who added that the company has posted an opening for a product manager. The brothers are using a stable of freelancers to develop content and create new STEM lessons for the Trashbots curricula.

Colliers International Vice President Zachary Ellis is serving as the company's commercial real estate broker as it searches for 1,000 to 1,500 square feet of warehouse space, where it will assemble the Trashbots kit. The Srinivasans are "looking at a couple places in South Austin," Sidharth said. They expect to close a deal "in the next month or so," he said.

For now, the team is working remotely.

Trashbots counts about 35 schools as customers, Rohit said. But he projected that number to "really increase" during the coming months, with "the school sales cycle about to finish up."

He projected 2020 revenue to be about \$250,000. The company is not yet profitable and remains in growth mode.

Competitors include the Mindstorms robotic kits made by Denmark-based Lego System A/S, kits from California-based Cubit Electronics Inc. and those from Boston-based Arduino LLC.

What differentiates Trashbots' kits, Sidharth said, are their price per kit — \$100 — and the startup's accompanying curricula.

"Teachers don't have to pay a third party to make a curriculum for them," he said. "Students can start learning something right out of the box."

Plus, Trashbots offers special packages for school districts to meet district needs for "ongoing support and professional development," Sidharth said.

And during the Covid-19 pandemic, the school districts with which Trashbots are working may ship the kits directly to students' homes, Sidharth said.

The brothers — who are the sons of Krishna Srinivasan, founding partner of Austin venture capital firm LiveOak Venture Partners — want to "reinvent STEM education, and we're making a platform to do that," Sidharth said.

An acquisition could occur "down the road," he said.

For now, however, the Srinivasans are focused on "creating something that is long-lasting with long-term value," Rohit said. "Good things will happen then, is the way we see it."

Rohit added that he and his brother have observed and learned from mistakes made by other young founders "who focused only on vanity things, like raising tons of money and only focused on an exit. We're focusing on our stakeholders and our customers."

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