Creation Gen

by Jocelyn Anderson

THESE DAYS, the smartphone is never far from reach. For a few UC Davis alumni, that's good for business.

The average U.S. smartphone user spends almost two hours a day on their device, according to Forrester Research. And while Google and Facebook remain the most popular mobile apps, options continue to grow, with gaming, lifestyle and education categories figuring big.

Now, entrepreneurial UC Davis alums are helming mobile apps to bring their ideas straight to the consumer.

Swatch watch

What started as a popular Instagram account showcasing the latest makeup shades on varied skin tones became a mobile app in February.

Ofunne Okwudiafor '11 developed Cocoa Swatches to offer beauty images, inspiration and tutorials with a focus on complexions that are underrepresented in traditional outlets.

"I've wasted a lot of money on products that don't work for me, because I couldn't find accurate reviews for people with my skin tone or I couldn't guesstimate when I was buying online or in stores," said Okwudiafor, who is of Nigerian decent. "I was wondering if other people had the same kind of struggles."

By developing an app, she aimed to make buying makeup easier and also highlight how the same product can look different based on skin type, color and undertone.

"A red lipstick, for example, might look one way on a lighter-skinned model, but on a darker-skinned person it might look completely different," she added.

Okwudiafor, who lives in New York, is working full time on the new app, enjoying the effects of good word of mouth. A week after launching the mobile app, it was featured on multiple beauty blogs.

In the future, she said she wants to build a diverse team to contribute content. And as the beauty industry continues to market limited-edition product, Okwudiafor said she will investigate brand partnerships for access to sneak peeks of new releases.

Food for thought

A new app called Foodfully promises to alert users when their food is about to go bad and even provide a good recipe for that specific item.

Co-founders Brianna McGuire, M.S. '15, and Justin Woodjack, M.S. '12 and Ph.D. candidate, created the app to help reduce food waste—which adds up to a whopping 35 million tons a year in the U.S. alone, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Ofunne Okwudiafor started Cocoa Swatches on Instagram to show makeup-related photos. The mobile app launched in February.

"It occurred to me there's this enormous investment in the food industry that doesn't really get seen by consumers," said McGuire, who is a plant pathologist. "Most folks just forget about the food they buy and throw it away."

The app was in beta for a few months before officially launching this spring. A profile on the crowdfunding platform WeFunder was scheduled to go live on May 16.

eRation

Foodfully automatically imports grocery store purchases made through Amazon Fresh, Instacart and retail rewards programs. Thanks to a patent-pending food spoilage algorithm, the app sends push notifications to prompt users to eat their food before it goes bad. Cognitive recipes—or those that take into account what's in your fridge, allergens and dietary preferences—help convince you to eat it.

"So here's a stir-fry recipe, and because you're allergic to peanuts we removed them, and because you don't have bok choy we substituted red cabbage, which our cognitive chef knows is a good replacement," said Woodjack.

Peer-to-peer tutoring

A discussion about the sharing economy—a market model in which people share access to goods and services—sparked an idea for Ben Holmquist '15 and Ben Morrison '14.

"We wondered if the sharing economy model could help academics as well," Holmquist said. They thought it could and immediately began developing tutoring app Penji, which launched in November 2015.

The duo described the app as Uber for academic assistance: UC Davis students who need help with specific classes can connect with classmates who can provide tutoring. For example, someone needing help in Chemistry 2B can request a two-hour tutoring session, make arrangements for the meeting and pay through the app. Sessions cost $20 an hour, with tutors earning $15 an hour.
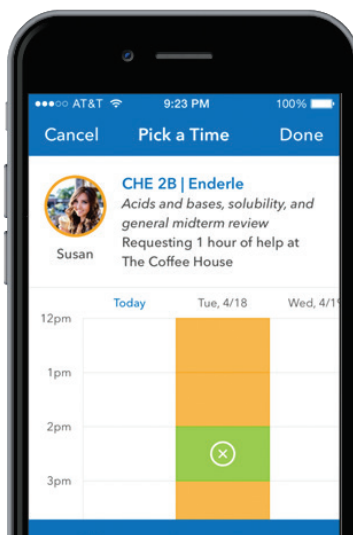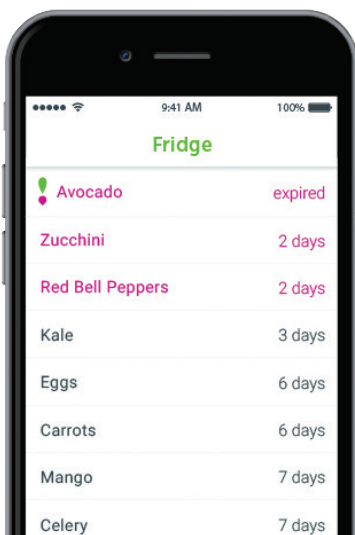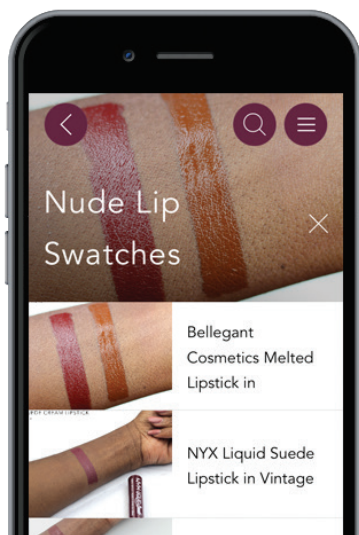
Right now, Penji is only available at UC Davis and is primarily used for the largest STEM courses. Holmquist said despite hurdles launching the app, usage is increasing. "The feedback has been extremely positive. We have a number of users who have returned repeatedly for more sessions and have cited the service as helping them through tough tests."

Both Bens are now working full-time on Penji. The partners have a team of nine people and plan to expand to the University of Colorado Boulder this fall. "We are definitely looking to bring Penji to other schools around the country," Holmquist said.

Additional reporting by Lisa Howard.

Left to right: Cocoa Swatches focuses on underrepresented skin tones, Foodfully offers reminders to prevent food waste, and Penji matches students with tutors.