It's almost as though Nikhil Sethi ('10) was destined to be a tech entrepreneur. Growing up in the San Francisco Bay area, he watched his father build a flash-memory startup. As a high school student, he developed a software business that allowed novel writers to collaborate.

"Basically, everybody on the block was part of a startup," he says. "I was nurtured in that culture."

So it's no surprise that Sethi heads the most successful startup to come out of McCormick's NUvention: Web course. His company, Adaptly, offers advertising agencies a unified platform to purchase ads across all social networks. Just two years old, it has 60 employees and has raised more than $13 million in funding.

"It's been phenomenal," he said.

Like many great entrepreneurship stories, it almost didn't happen. With an interest in patent law and an electrical engineer for a father, Sethi entered Northwestern in a special program that allows McCormick graduates to proceed directly to Northwestern's law school.

In his electrical engineering classes he learned logic-based reasoning—the ability to understand the nuts and bolts of a problem—but the academic theories were making him feel distanced from the real world and his startup roots. He began spending time at the Kellogg School of Management and eventually teamed up with two MBA students to found Blurtt.com, a service connecting the virtual and the real worlds by allowing users to send real postcards to social media friends. Still weighing whether law school was for him, Sethi also spent time with the school's mock trial team.

Then during his senior year he found out about NUvention: Web, in which students work in multidisciplinary teams to design, build, and ultimately launch software-based businesses. This was the course Sethi had been waiting for: a structured way to find a viable idea and actually bring it to market. He applied at the last minute and was put on a team of five people—two from Kellogg and three from McCormick. During their first meetings he told them about an idea that had been simmering since the summer before, when he had interned at HBO. The channel was launching the show True Blood and had to negotiate with several groups to advertise on different social networks.
“I thought, There has got to be a better technology solution to allow a brand to take a message and get it in front of many different people in different social environments quickly,” he says.

The business school students had some reservations: the numbers weren’t there for this kind of business, the market wouldn’t allow for growth, and they didn’t know anything about the advertising space. None of those was a deal breaker for Sethi. He thought he would either go big with the idea or take a job at a major software company.

“The fact that we knew very little about how traditional advertising works has been a big advantage for us,” he says. “If we had listened to the numbers, we wouldn’t be here. But I was passionate about the idea.”

At the end of the course Sethi and Garrett Ullom, a computer science student, headed off to DreamIt Ventures incubator, which gave them $25,000 and offered to teach them a new skill: sales.

“How do you actually go to a customer and sell something?” Sethi said. “That’s an area where we didn’t have any experience.”

If it didn’t work out, they thought, Ullom could go back to school and Sethi could find a regular job.

But the momentum didn’t stop. Sethi and Ullom were able to raise another $700,000 in seed money, which got them an office in New York City and enough capital to start working. There were missteps along the way, but the company grew—from 2 people to 5, then to 20, then to 60. Early on Adaptly was able to attract top-tier clients such as PepsiCo, Arby’s, News Corp., Razorfish, and Diageo and has continued that strong growth momentum by working with hundreds more high-profile clients.

While CEO Sethi jets from coast to coast meeting with clients and giving keynotes (calling on the speaking skills he learned back on the mock trial team), he knows he’s still learning to manage a growing company. Next to his bed is a stack of human psychology books.

“This is fundamentally a game of humans,” he says. “It’s optimizing for happiness.” Sethi made an early misstep when, in a cost-saving move, he set up the company in an office that was inside another business. There was no office culture in the shared space. Now, in a new space complete with a cereal bar and with a “happiness manager,” employees are behaving and interacting much differently.

And after just two years in the business, Sethi’s already giving back as a member of the NUvention: Web advisory board. In the quick-turnaround world of tech startups, he may be the course’s most experienced alumnus.

“I think there’s a lot of knowledge that can be shared, and everything is so fresh in my mind,” he says. “We failed a lot. Advertising, especially, is a roller coaster. It’s always up and down, and it’s easy to fall behind. But in engineering you learn that failure is part of the regimen. There’s always something that will knock you off. Getting back up is the part that’s most important to learn.”

Tapping into alumni knowledge was one of the best skills Sethi learned as an undergraduate. Most students don’t know they can connect with the powerful Northwestern alumni network, he says, but as he was starting Adaptly, he reached out each day to a different alum to ask for a 15-minute coffee meeting. He was never turned down.

Such persistence will help him for the rest of his life.

“If all else fails,” he says, “I’ll do it again.”

Emily Ayshford