TEAM8 PORTFOLIO SESSION → NOVEMBER 2026

How to stand out in the RSAC Innovation Sandbox 2027

What RSAC requires, what it rewards, and the one line a judge repeats the next morning.

NATE BURKE → PITCHED AXONIUS, THE 2019 INNOVATION SANDBOX WINNER → AUTHOR, RESIST COMFORT

Ten finalists.
Three minutes each.
One line a judge repeats.

How to approach the RSAC Innovation Sandbox: what RSAC requires for 2027, why meeting it isn't enough, and how to build the one line that survives the judges' deliberation.

What this session covers

[01]	**The 2027 requirements**	Dates, criteria, format, prizes, and the SAFE you have to accept.
[02]	**The written rubric**	What RSAC scores, and why answering it well still leaves you sounding like everyone else.
[03]	**Your Camry and your demo**	The one line a judge can still repeat the next day, and the judges' demo that proves it.
[04]	**The plan**	Four working weeks from December 1 to a submitted entry, plus a checklist.

[01] THE 2027 REQUIREMENTS

What RSAC has published for 2027

RSAC has posted the full 2027 calendar, the criteria and the prizes. The window is six weeks, and the holidays land in the middle of it.

Dec 1	Jan 14	Apr 5	$5M
SUBMISSIONS OPEN	SUBMISSIONS CLOSE AT 5 PM PT	TOP 10 PITCH LIVE, MONDAY AT RSAC 2027	UNCAPPED SAFE FOR EACH FINALIST

SOURCE: RSACONFERENCE.COM/USA/PROGRAMS/INNOVATION-SANDBOX, AS OF NOVEMBER 25, 2026

The 2027 contest calendar

Submissions open	Tuesday, December 1, 2026
Submissions close	Thursday, January 14, 2027, 5:00 PM PT
Top 10 notified	Mid-February 2027, followed by pitch coaching from RSAC's experts
Live pitches	Monday, April 5, 2027, in front of the judges and a live audience
Winner named	The same day, April 5, 2027

RSAC's own advice: don't wait until the last day. First cuts are made on whether the submission is complete.

Who qualifies to compete in 2027

RSAC's qualifying criteria for 2027.

One changed from 2025: a beta no longer counts. A client has to have bought and implemented the product.

01	**Launched in the window**	Between December 1, 2025 and January 14, 2027.
02	**Original and sound**	An original, sound approach to solving the problem.
03	**A real problem**	It matches an identified problem in the cybersecurity market.
04	**Significant impact**	The potential to make a significant impact on security.
05	**Bought and implemented**	A client has purchased and implemented the product.
06	**Go-to-market in place**	A plan to deliver the product commercially.
07	**A strong team**	A strong management structure and team in place.
08	**Small and private**	Privately held, under $5M ARR, and no public company controls more than 20%.

What the judges see, in two rounds

ROUND ONE → THE SUBMISSION

A full form and a three-minute video

The CEO or founder who will pitch on stage presents the video. No AI voices. Judges stop watching at three minutes. Don’t reuse a video made for something else.

ROUND TWO → THE STAGE

Three minutes, live, April 5

The Top 10 get coaching, then pitch to the judges in front of a live audience. The winner is named the same day.

THE 2027 PANEL

Dave Chen, Morgan Stanley
Jason Clinton, Anthropic
Paul Kocher, independent researcher
Katherine Kuehn, WWT
Niloofar Razi, National Security Institute

The judges’ question, in RSAC’s words: which company will have the greatest impact on the industry over the next 12 months.

What a Top 10 spot is worth

EVERY FINALIST GETS

- A $5M uncapped SAFE, delivered by Crosspoint Capital
- A live pitch to the judges and 1,000+ attendees
- Pitch coaching from RSAC's experts
- A profile on the RSAC site and a seat in the Founders' Circle

THE WINNER ADDS

- A kiosk in the Early Stage Expo
- Media interviews
- The title "Most Innovative Startup 2027"

BEFORE YOU SUBMIT

The $5M comes with conditions, and accepting it is required to be a finalist. That's the next slide.

Past finalists have raised $17B+ with $50B+ in exit value (RSAC).

Decide on the SAFE before you submit

Finalists must accept the SAFE and its side letter to be selected.

Some strong companies skip the contest over these terms. Make that call with your board and your Team8 partners now, not when the finalist call comes in February.

Amount	$5M from Crosspoint Capital, on a modified Y Combinator “discount, no cap” SAFE
Valuation cap	None
Discount	5% to 20%, rising with the time until your next priced round
On a sale	The greater of 1x back or the as-converted amount
Rights	Pro rata and information rights. No board seat.

SOURCE: RSAC ISB SAFE DETAILS. READ THE SIDE LETTER WITH YOUR COUNSEL.

[02] THE STRATEGY

The rubric is written down

RSAC tells you what it scores. Every serious entry will answer all of it, so answering it well won't set you apart.

01 **Original and sound**

02 **A real problem**

03 **Significant impact**

04 **Bought and implemented**

05 **Go-to-market in place**

06 **A strong team**

07 **Small and private**

08 **Ready for demand**

Hitting the rubric

wins you nothing.

You still have to meet every requirement. Skip one and you’re out.

But every serious team meets them, so the answers converge and the entries start to sound the same.

BELIEF 4 → DESIGN FOR MEMORY, NOT JUST EXPLANATION

What will a judge still be able to repeat tomorrow?

Write for the first reader, who isn’t a judge

A screening committee works through the stack before any judge sees it.

Picture a smart non-expert with hundreds of submissions. They cut the weak and incomplete ones and leave notes on the rest for the judges.

RSAC says its first round of evaluations is based on whether a submission is complete.

MAKE IT MEMORABLE FOR THAT READER

01	**Complete every field**	Incomplete entries are the first ones cut.
02	**Drop the jargon**	If they’d have to look it up, they won’t repeat it.
03	**Write their note**	Your analogy should be the line they copy down for the judges.
04	**Pass the friend test**	They should be able to explain you to a friend in one sentence.

AI will make most 2027 entries sound alike

AI didn’t make you faster. It made everyone faster at the same thing.

More than 200 startups applied in 2025, up over 40 percent. Most 2027 entries will be drafted with the same tools and land on the same words: platform, visibility, autonomous, agentic.

THE LOGO TEST

Cover your company name. If a judge couldn’t tell your submission from the one before it, rewrite it before you send it.

Study past pitches before you write yours

01	**Collect the pitches**	Ten to twenty past Top 10 pitches, winners and losers. RSAC posts them. Nobody watches them because it looks like procrastination.
02	**Extract the questions**	For each section, write down the question it answered. Ignore the answers.
03	**Count**	What every pitch covers is the written rubric. What only the winners have is the interesting part.
04	**Answer every requirement**	The competent answer to each one. Everybody will do this, and you have to as well.
05	**Spend the rest on one thing**	Meet the requirements fast. Put everything left into one analogy built to be repeated.

Spend 160 seconds on the requirements and 20 on your analogy



The mistake is spending all three minutes on the requirements: eight good answers and nothing left over. That produces the best version of what everyone else is producing.

In 2019, the Camry got about twenty seconds. That was enough. The same split works for the three-minute submission video.

Everything that went wrong before Axonius won

01 We had applied before and been rejected. Too early.

02 Dean, our CEO, was presenting. Every line was written for his voice.

03 The night before, his flight was delayed, then cancelled.

04 I had under 24 hours to rewrite it as mine and convince RSAC to let a CMO pitch.

05 At tech rehearsal my notes didn't load. I bombed.

06 On stage, I lost my place completely. One second that felt like a month.

07 The line that came back was the Camry. I finished at exactly three minutes.

08 We won. A Fortune 500 company called before I was off the floor.

THE 2019 PITCH → AXONIUS, CYBERSECURITY ASSET MANAGEMENT

“The Toyota Camry is the most sold car in America because it fulfills the promise. It gets you from point A to point B. Every time.”

Nobody has a poster of a Camry on their wall. And everything you want to do that day depends on it starting.

Years later, people still greet me as the Toyota Camry guy. Nobody has ever repeated our value proposition back to me.

Five rules for building your Camry

01	**Source it outside security**	Every analogy inside the category is already in use. Cars, kitchens, airlines, plumbing.
02	**Make it ordinary**	A glamorous comparison flatters you and teaches nothing. Nobody repeats an advertisement.
03	**Survive the second question**	Have someone hostile push on it three times. It should bend, not break.
04	**Make it carry the argument**	Remove it. If the point is still clear, it was decoration.
05	**Be slightly self-deprecating**	The concession buys the claim underneath it, in front of a professionally skeptical panel.

Why it works: concrete words are stored twice, as a word and as an image (Paivio's dual coding, 1971). "Asset management" is abstract. A Camry is a picture.



CYBER MARKETING CON 2026 → AUSTIN → KEYNOTE

Resist Comfort: How to Block your Caveman Urge to be Boring & Do Your Best Work Ever

A keynote for 700+ cyber marketing leaders on why sameness feels safe, why AI makes it worse, and seven beliefs for doing work people remember.

READ THE BOOK, FREE

nathanwburke.com/resist

The Comfort Check, the analogy rules and the repeat-back test all come from it.

Run the Comfort Check before you write a word

1 → THE COMFORTABLE ASSUMPTION

You win a rubric by answering the rubric well.

The belief nobody voted on. If you can name the meeting where it was decided, it isn't one.

2 → THE TRUE OBJECTIVE

Be the one pitch a judge can still repeat tomorrow.

A change in somebody else's head. If you could hit it while the business got worse, it's an activity.

3 → THE REDESIGNED APPROACH

Satisfy the rubric quietly. Spend everything left on one analogy.

Built backward from question two. Write at least two, and make one an answer you don't like.

Run the repeat-back test

01 **Tell five people what you do**

02 **Wait a week**

03 **Ask them what you do**

If your analogy comes back, you built one. If a paraphrase of your category comes back, you wrote a description, and nobody passes a description along.

BELIEF 3 FROM THE KEYNOTE

Better is subjective. Different is measurable.

One warning: you will get bored of your line about nine months before your market has heard it once. Don’t change it because the team is tired of it.

Four things to prepare for the stage

01

Rehearse without notes

Mine didn’t load at tech rehearsal. Assume yours won’t either.

02

Know your recovery line

Under pressure, the line you built to be memorable is the one you’ll remember. Practice getting back to it from anywhere.

03

Walk out of a bad run

Grinding repetitions of a version that isn’t working makes it worse. Reset and come back.

04

Land at exactly 3:00

Rehearse to the second. I finished at exactly three minutes, even after losing my place.

Plan two demos for the judges

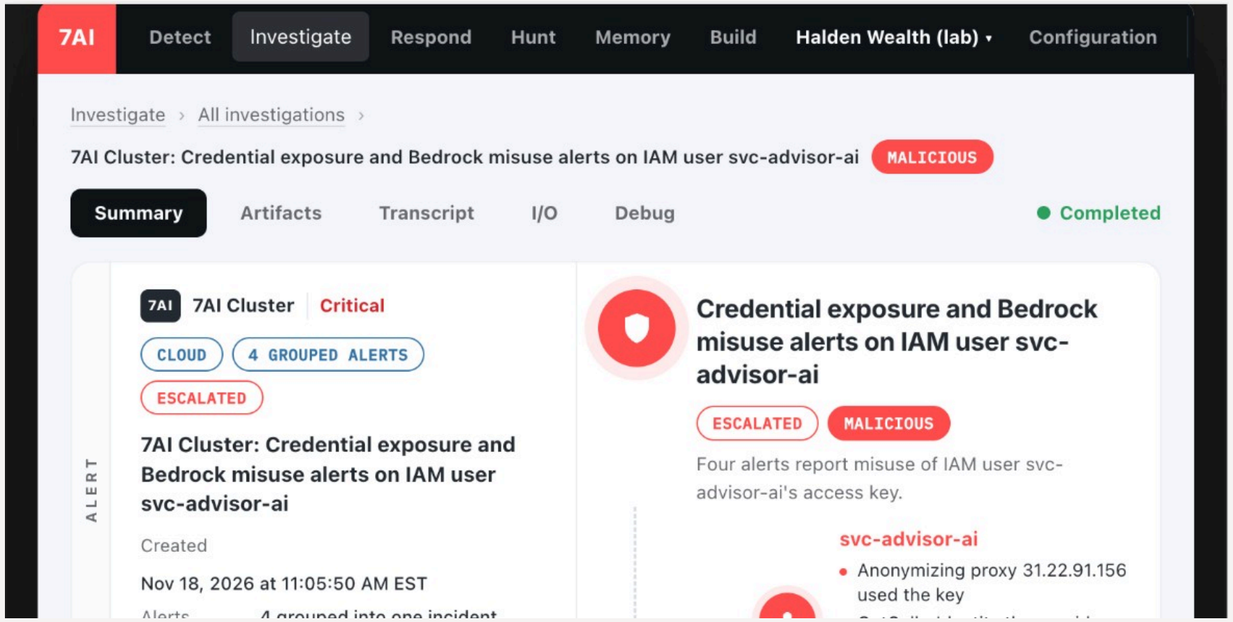
One in the video, one in person.

RSAC recommends a short demo in your submission video. In 2019, a judge also came to our booth for a demo after the pitch, and I had no idea who he was.

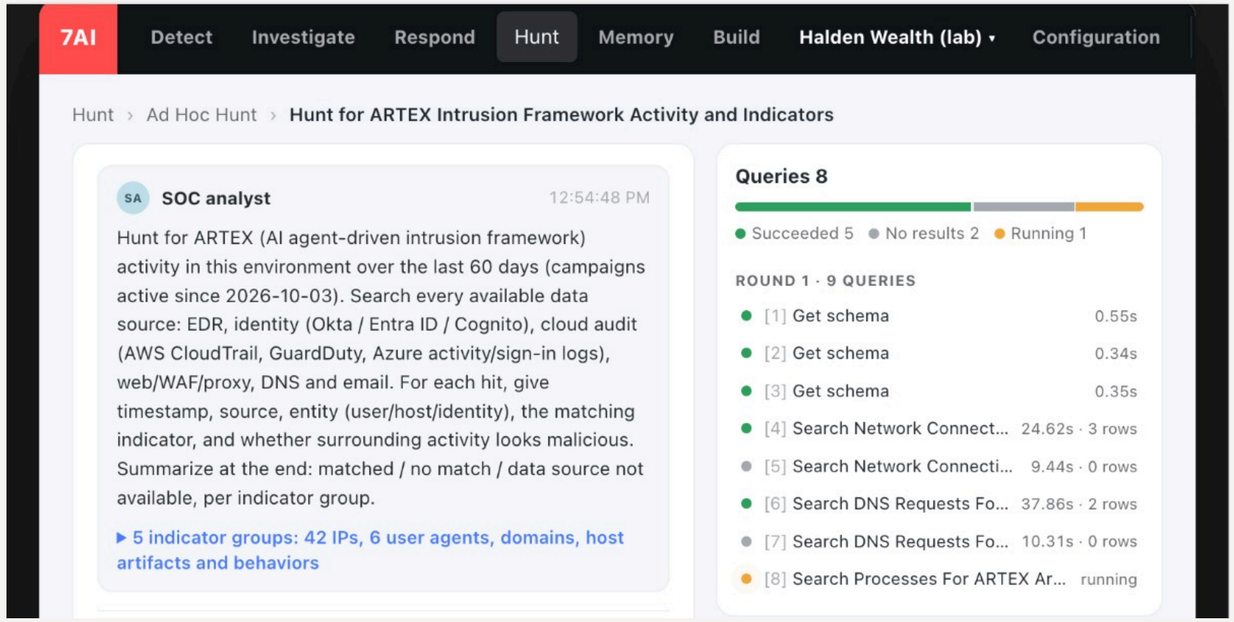
Your pitch makes a promise. The demo is where a judge checks it.

01	**Prove the line**	Show the promise your pitch made. If your Camry says it starts every time, show it starting.
02	**Put it in the video**	A short demo inside the three minutes. Show the product working, not more slides.
03	**Make it fail-proof**	Build a replay with Claude that needs no Wi-Fi or live tenant. Assume the network fails, like my notes did.
04	**Give everyone the judge demo**	You may not recognize the judges. Treat every visitor as one, and keep it under three minutes.
05	**Staff for the floodgates**	Bring someone who isn't presenting to book meetings. A Fortune 500 company called before I was off the floor.

Two ARTEX demos we built with Claude



INVESTIGATION REPLAY → AN ARTEX INTRUSION, INVESTIGATED END TO END



HUNT REPLAY → ONE PLAIN-LANGUAGE HUNT FOR ARTEX

Start from a real run

We gave Claude the transcripts, queries and results from a lab run.

Ask for a replay

Claude rebuilt the screens as a replay that plays the same way every time.

Check it against the source

Every step traces to the real run, and nothing depends on Wi-Fi.

[03] THE PLAN

A plan to submit before the holidays

WEEK OF	FOCUS	OUTPUT
December 1	Read the terms. Confirm your launch date and a client who bought and implemented. Review the SAFE with your Team8 partners.	**Go or no-go**
December 7	Watch 10 to 20 past pitches, winners and losers. Extract the questions and count them.	**Your derived rubric**
December 14	Answer every requirement and every field. Draft three analogies from outside security and kill two.	**Full draft and your analogy**
December 21	Run the repeat-back test and the grader skill. Record the video with your CEO or founder and a short demo. Submit.	**Submitted entry**

The deadline is January 14 at 5 PM PT. Use January as your buffer, not your writing time.

Before you hit submit

01 Launched between December 1, 2025 and January 14, 2027

02 Privately held, under $5M ARR

03 A client who has bought and implemented the product

04 Every field complete, nothing left blank

05 A clear answer to every requirement, written for a non-expert

06 One concrete analogy from outside security, tested on five people

07 A three-minute video from your CEO or founder, with a short demo and no AI voice

08 A yes on the SAFE from your board

Boring is the only unforgivable sin.

THIS DECK AS A PDF

Every slide and the 2027 rules

THE BOOK: RESIST COMFORT

nathanwburke.com/resist

THE GRADER SKILL FOR CLAUDE

nathanwburke.com/isb-grader