

Cal State business program gives students real-world experience

By: DAVID GARRICK - Staff Writer

NORTH COUNTY ---- Five business students from Cal State San Marcos recently helped a local marketing firm figure out that young men pay attention to video displays in sporting goods stores.

Another team of students helped a local medical products manufacturer solve some customer satisfaction riddles.

These teams were among 45 student groups from the university that worked as consultants this semester for local businesses. The consulting projects are part of the Senior Experience program at the university's College of Business Administration.

Students gain real-world experience and teamwork skills by tackling actual dilemmas faced by local businesses, according to Keith Butler, director of the 13-year-old program.

"They get to take a real-world problem and try to solve it," Butler said. "Getting experience with high-visibility organizations and working out team issues is a real key."

The group working on the video display ads conducted 600 surveys and came up with 400 observations to help Allodic Marketing determine that male shoppers between ages 18 and 34 were responding to the in-store ads, according to Trevor Jones, a member of the team.

"It really gave us a chance to do something real world before we get into the real world," said Rich Knitter, another member of the team. "We had to figure out whether it was natural for people to look at the digital displays or not."

The students determined that the video ads were effective at reaching the elusive young male demographic, which the students said is difficult to reach because they typically play video games instead of watching television.

But Jones said his group would not have succeeded on the project if they had worked as individuals.

"Probably the best thing for me was learning from each group member," said Jones, explaining that the group included specialists in public speaking, marketing and technology. "I think it will make me well-rounded to see how all our talents came together."

A unique aspect of the Allodic project was that the owner of the fledgling company is a recent graduate of the university's business program.

"I was in their shoes just a couple of years ago," said Jeremy Bruhn, 28. "Senior Experience allows students to work on projects that are changing and evolving like in the real world. I probably would not have had the confidence to start my own business without that experience."

Advice from the student team is already having an impact, said Bruhn, explaining that student findings have prompted Allodic to focus more on eye-level displays than taller ads.

Camille Schuster, the professor who coordinated the Allodic project, said the most important thing learned by the students was how to define a problem.

"The students enjoyed the fact that it was a young company with a marketing problem that had no specific description," Schuster said. "This made them define the problem, which will help them in the future."

'Projects of distinction'

The Allodic project was one of three that were singled out as "projects of distinction" Thursday night during a Senior Experience trade show and celebration at the California Center for the Arts, Escondido. Several hundred students, university employees and local business leaders attended the event.

Butler said the trade show was an opportunity for students to network, pitch themselves to potential employers, and learn how to set up for a trade show.

"As I have walked around the room and asked them how things are going, I have been greeted by many smiling faces," Butler said. "The energy in the room has just been wonderful."

Dennis Guseman, dean of the business college, said he was pleased to see so much networking at the event.

"It is exciting to see these projects all together, and to see the reactions that the students are getting," Guseman said.

The other two projects of distinction were for Linfield Christian School in Temecula and for Breg, a medical products manufacturer in Vista.

Applying classroom skills

Students on the Breg project, which was an analysis of the company's customer relations policies, said that tackling such an issue made use of many classroom lessons.

"This was a great example of taking what we learned and applying it in the real world," said Alyssa Hoeben, a student on the Breg project. "Our business skills from classes were reinforced, but they were reinforced in the real world instead of a classroom setting."

Emilena Lopez, another member of the Breg team, said the project taught her how to communicate with the people she surveyed, her team members and Breg officials.

"It taught me to how to speak up and how to communicate with people who are hesitant," Lopez said.

Peggy Denson, a Breg executive, said the project helped the company fix some nagging concerns about customer satisfaction.

"The students were extremely professional, considerate and efficient with communication," Denson said. "They seem like promising young people."

High marks from businesses

Butler said that businesses in the program, which pay \$1,000 for a semester of student consulting work, end up satisfied with the student results about 90 percent of time. Over the years, he said, the businesses have included Legoland California, Qualcomm and local police departments.

The students involved in the Senior Experience said they hope that these internships will look good on a resume.

"I think this experience is definitely an answer to 'why should I hire you instead of someone else,' " said Jones, a student from the Allodic project.

Butler said the program, which all senior business majors must complete, is unique in the United States.

"It's the perfect program for business students," he said, explaining that the program attracts many students to the university's business college. "On the other hand, a small number of students avoid us because they are scared of this program."

Knitter, one of the Allodic students, said that public speaking is probably the most intimidating factor for some students.

"You need the confidence to report on your project to other students, to describe your project to people at the trade show and to communicate with the company," Knitter said. "But that is great, because you will need to do all those things to succeed in the business world."

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