

News

University students attend sales event at 3M



“Sales for Social Impact” encourages students to think outside the box and learn how business can be a sustainable contributor.

The record snowfall could not keep out the warmth and buzz at the “Sales for Social Impact” student program held in December at the 3M Innovation Center in St. Paul.

It was the culmination of a new course the students had taken called Sales for Social Impact (SSI). 3M’s sponsorship of the course was through its 3M Frontline partnership, which works with partner universities to interest students in the sales profession (see sidebar). At this competitive event five student teams from 3M’s Frontline partner schools (Baylor University, DePaul University, University of Houston, Indiana University and St. Catherine University) presented sales plans they developed as part of the SSI course.

The competition focused on the various aspects of social venture sales efforts and what makes them successful. The course is being taught at select universities in collaboration with Mackerere University in Uganda and two St. Paul-based nonprofits — Compatible Technology International (CTI) and the Acara Institute. As Fred Rose of Acara said, “The purpose of this program is to get university students into a real-world situation with real products and real people.”

The assigned task

The teams were charged with creating a sales plan to sell the Ewing III crop/food grinder, made by CTI, to be sold in Uganda, and the students needed to work to understand the customer, the product, and why people would buy and use it. This was not an easy task — especially since the class did not include travel to Uganda.

The students were required to understand all aspects of the selling process, including value pricing, identifying key target customer segments and understanding the sales channels. In addition, they needed to apply these concepts when selling to the base of the socio-

economic pyramid. The plans were judged by a panel from 3M, Acara and CTI.

All the teams made impressive presentations. But in the end, the plan presented by student Jordan Sutter from DePaul University, Chicago, won the competition. The winning plan involved providing an affordable opportunity for Ugandan citizens to better their lives.

Eye-opening experience

According to Sutter, the experience was an eye-opener. “It provided a means for us to apply the concepts we learned in our classes and incorporate them into a business plan, keeping in mind the needs of the end-users of our product. We had to remind ourselves that when working in a country like Uganda, everything costs too much,” she said.

Latifah Kiribedda, a Ugandan student from St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minn., believes this was a unique learning opportunity that fostered global understanding within the classroom and outside. “I felt that we were making a difference by [working on plans that could improve] the well-being of the people in my country of Uganda,” she said.

The bottom of the pyramid

According to Professor Rosann Spiro of the Kelly School of Business at Indiana University, the new curriculum gives students a world view that goes beyond the classroom.

“It was challenging at a lot of levels: How do you implement a marketing plan for a population that does not have disposable income, and how do you figure out a way to make your product affordable?” said Spiro. (The plan developed by the Indiana University team favored collaborating with Uganda-based non-governmental organizations and women’s organizations.) For her students Kyle Mathews and Jon Walsh, the experience made them think about business in a different way. “It opened



Working together to make a difference

For nearly 15 years, 3M Talent Acquisition, Community Affairs and the 3M Sales Leadership Council have worked with partner universities to interest students in the sales profession. This has involved developing a relevant curriculum, providing internships and hiring students to work at 3M.

When the 3M Frontline partnership was established, few schools offered a sales curriculum for students. Today, there are over 100 universities with sales curricula, and the universities and 3M agreed it is time for a new initiative, said Barbara Kaufmann, manager, Education Giving, Community Affairs.

Launched in the 2010-2011 school year with a corporate grant, the Sales for Social Impact course helps students use the skills they have learned to develop a sales plan that can contribute to the greater good of humanity by having a direct positive impact on meeting the needs of those who reside at the base of the socioeconomic pyramid. Kaufmann said this is a great example of different pillars of 3M working together to impact student learning and perception of 3M.

our minds about other cultures,” Mathews said.

For Stephanie Salas, a marketing student from Houston University, it was learning how to impact the bottom of the pyramid that was an eye-opener. “I feel that I’ve grown as a person by coming to understand an entirely different aspect of sales and how it can lead to a positive impact on the lives of an entire population,” she said.

3M’s global commitment

Perhaps the most global team of all was from Baylor University, with MBA students from China, Albania, France and India. The team’s mentor, Professor Jim Anderson, believes his team’s varied backgrounds contributed to their strong and emotional presentation.

Regarding their experience working with 3M, Anderson was very impressed by the company’s commitment to corporate social responsibility. “Strong organizations are made up of strong people and 3M has that,” he said. For his students Amy Ristani from Albania, Dorothy Winn from France and Ting Ting Liu from China, this exposure and experience was remarkable for the many ways it encouraged them to think outside the box.

The students overall went back to their universities richer in experience and with the knowledge that, as long as there are companies like 3M, a successful sales and marketing career can be achieved while keeping an eye on social change and sustainable development.