

## VU Teams Work for the Sale

### Accelerator program connects business with student marketers

By Wendy Lee  
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This was the problem facing a group of students at Vanderbilt University: Help Whirlpool Corp. sell a warehouse full of \$199 clothes steamers no one seems to want.

Whirlpool came out with the Fabric Freshener two years ago, and despite good write-ups in everything from *People* to *Good Housekeeping*, it has sold few of the 27-pound machines.

The company, with \$18.1 billion in sales last year, wanted the students' help in figuring out ways to sell the thousands of steamers it has in storage.

The exercise was part of Vanderbilt's Accelerator program, a 30-day, \$8,500 course that presents undergraduates and recent graduates with real-world problems and, in some cases, can lead to internships or jobs. This year's program ends today.

Businesses such as Whirlpool, FedEx and American Airlines view the program as part recruiting tool and part think tank.

"Instead of paying a consultant, who may be a recent MBA graduate, why not get opinions from students six months from graduation and have them do the work for free?" said Mark Hughes, an analyst at SunTrust Robinson Humphrey, who researches colleges and universities. Companies give prizes to the teams with the best ideas.

Michael Burcham, the Accelerator program's faculty director, said the students' ideas can be very helpful to the participating companies.

Businesses "would never get their own folks to think for them as creatively as these students because they are too close to the business," he said. "It gives them a sense for what's possible for the product."

### Students get 16 hours

The program, one of a few of its kind in the country, works like a scholastic version of the TV show *The Apprentice*. Students are divided into five teams, led by coaches who have gone through the program or the business school, and get no more than 16 working hours to find a solution for each company's problem.

On a Tuesday afternoon earlier this month, two Whirlpool managers laid out their problem to the 45 students enrolled in the program.

D. Jill Dugan-Miller, a Whirlpool brand manager, explained that the company had sold the Fabric Freshener before at Lowe's and Best Buy with disappointing results.

Research showed, however, that once customers used the steamer, which removes odors while relaxing wrinkles, they liked it. Sixty-seven percent said they would recommend it to someone, Dugan-Miller said.

Despite poor sales of the original Fabric Freshener, the company believes a new and improved version of the steamer would sell. Before it puts the second version of the steamer on the market, it needs to clear its warehouses of the older machines.

Whirlpool wanted to use word-of-mouth marketing to sell the Fabric Freshener. It didn't want to spend any money.

The next Friday, a team of nine students, who nicknamed themselves the Guerrilla Marketing Group, met in a classroom and began brainstorming ways to sell the steamers.

"It looks like a spaceship laundry basket," quipped Lauren Dornfeld, who graduated from Vanderbilt in May with bachelor's degrees in history and Spanish.

Over the next two hours, the students scribbled dozens of ideas on a dry-erase board. Ray McGill, who's majoring in information science at Cornell University, suggested they go after business students. His slogan: "Sharp minds need sharp suits."

### **Research hits snags**

On Sunday, McGill and team leader Adrian Reif, who graduated from Vanderbilt in May with a bachelor's degree in psychology, decided to see what potential customers thought of the Fabric Freshener.

So, they lugged one of the steamers to Vanderbilt's Benton Chapel. Someone attending services there suggested they try some other time. The teammates were shooed away, too, from a nearby farmers market and wound up outside the Pancake Pantry in Hillsboro Village, where they hoped some people waiting to get in would talk to them.

Some of the people in their improvised focus group said they would consider using the steamer in a gym, while others said the price was too high.

Brock Williams, a Vanderbilt administrator, thought it would sell for \$19.99 and said he'd need to see the steamer work before buying one.

"You test drive a car, you put on a shoe and walk around in it," Williams said.

But a demonstration, which might have helped convince shoppers the steamer was worth almost \$200, wouldn't be practical, not even in a store. The Fabric Freshener takes 30 minutes to work.

### **Teams lay out strategies**

Earlier, the students had cracked jokes and talked over one another as they brainstormed, but last Sunday, they worked quietly, creating a poster and PowerPoint slides that spelled out their idea.

The team wanted to place Fabric Fresheners in high-end fitness centers and men's clothing stores and at business and law schools where students would be interviewing for jobs.

Guerrilla Marketing's coach, Thomas Salas, a 2006 graduate of the Vanderbilt Owen Graduate School of Management who helped start Accelerator when he was a student, said privately he was worried the team's strategy was too simple to win.

Tuesday morning, Reif, McGill and a third team member, Michael Puchon, an economics major at the University of Pennsylvania, waited nervously outside a business school auditorium to make their presentation to the Whirlpool executives. McGill wondered aloud whether he should drink tea or water before his pitch. Puchon paced, reviewing his notes.

"Once I get past the first sentence in the presentation, I'll be fine," he said.

The presentations took place behind closed doors. Each lasted 10 minutes, with an additional five minutes for questions by the Whirlpool officials. After all five teams had gone, the students were asked to leave the room while the officials reviewed the plans. On their way out, the students picked up free Whirlpool ice-cream scoops.

After deliberating about 20 minutes, the Whirlpool officials announced the winner:

### **Guerrilla Marketing Group.**

"I was really blown away," said Dugan-Miller, the Whirlpool manager. "The level of information was really very useful. I was amazed at what they could do over the course of seven days."

So far, no team member has gotten an internship or job offer from Whirlpool, but the appliance company did give each of the nine members of Guerrilla Marketing a prize: a Fabric Freshener.