PONTIAC TEST-DRIVES STRATEGY ON FIU CAMPUS

When Pontiac executives wanted to get a bead on the up-and-coming 18- to 34-year-old consumer market, they didn't hire a New York marketing consulting firm to tell them about the Generation Y market.

They called in a bunch of marketing students.

Last fall, Pontiac commissioned a marketing class from Florida International University's College of Business Administration to conduct research and develop a marketing plan for its new Vibe automobile. The 16 students conducted peer focus groups, personal interviews and research and recently presented their results to the client.

It seemed a natural fit. The Vibe, which debuted earlier this year, targets the 18- to 34-year-old audience with performance and sporty looks. What better location to test-market the car than on a college campus, wondered Angela Montgomery, Southeast region marketing manager for GM's Pontiac Division, which each year sponsors this program with 20 college marketing programs throughout the Southeast.

Last year, it was the Aztek minisport-utility vehicle. Previously, the company has studied the Grand Am and Sunfire models.

The students surveyed about 200 of their peers about the Vibe's style and features. While the students aren't compensated for their work, they were given a budget for expenses. They staged and conducted focus groups to determine consumer attitudes and awareness about the product and the brand. They then wrote up their findings and presented them to Montgomery and local Pontiac representatives.

The key findings: South Florida consumers are likely to drive imports. Hispanics lack an affinity for the brand, and Pontiac must target the younger and ethnic markets more aggressively. The students suggested a promotion that placed the car and supporting signage in key locations throughout South Florida, including South Beach, Coconut Grove and the Las Olas Boulevard area.

They thought Pontiac should give passers-by a test drive or a better look at the vehicle, showing off its features and trying to convince them that the car's design is exciting and stylish.

The program was a win-win and could easily be duplicated by any marketer looking to better understand consumers, said Carl Kranendonk, marketing professor with the FIU College of Business Administration. Rather than choosing a product off a shelf to create a program for, students get real-world experience with a real product and client, and GM learns about its target audience.

"That was the difference," Kranendonk said. "Textbooks are too generic. This really becomes meaningful to them when they recognize this is a true product they're dealing with. They have responsibility to a client and a budget and have to answer to them. It hits them that, 'Oh, this is how it works.'"

This was the first such program for team leader Racquel Nosworthy, a senior marketing student in the program. Not only did she have to answer to Montgomery, she had to work with her team to create and conduct the research and draw up the marketing plan. In fact, what she thought would be dull — the market research, including surveys, interviews and focus groups — was actually exciting, she said.

Even discovering that Pontiac was not well received by Hispanics was interesting, though she was nervous about making design and marketing recommendations, she said.

"You see how people think about a product and how to improve it," Nosworthy said. "We get a lot of frivolous assignments. For me, that was the best presentation I ever gave. It was easier to answer questions and convey information, rather than just presenting something from a textbook. Now we understand what market research is all about."

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