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By Kathy Routliffe

Top teams prevail in best-buzz match

Madison Avenue's man in the gray flannel suit, that pioneer in the American art of mass advertising, may well be a relic of the corporate past, but it doesn't mean modern businesses don't want to market themselves to potential customers.

It just means that strategies, tactics and even the language used in their efforts have changed to encompass the 21st century's wired world.

In January, 10 teams of business students from Northwestern University's J.L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management took their turn at crafting a modern marketing campaign, but doing it in a way their gray-flannelled predecessor might not have recognized.

The first "Best of the Buzz" contest, sponsored by Chicago-based Sittercity, asked student competitors to devise a successful publicity campaign, one unusual enough to attract attention to the company's Sittercity.com Web site. The online database matches baby-sitters and nannies with parents who need them.

Creative ploys

The type of marketing? A "buzz campaign." In modern business parlance, buzz campaigns are tooled around on a public event or short-term advertising ploy so creatively connected to the product that media outlets are intrigued and spread word about the campaign, hence its product – thus doing the company's marketing for free.

The catch? Competitors had to complete the project, from initial idea to final polished presentation, in just 24 hours.

Sittercity, which started in Chicago in 2001, had a good reason to want some original marketing, CEO and founder Genevieve Thiers said in a recent interview. It was poised to open in 20 more cities across the country, and it needed a method of spreading the word about itself in a creatively frugal what that fit the pocketbooks of an innovative but young company.

Company officials looked around for potential help in formulating an advertising campaign that could publicize the expansion. Kellogg sprang almost immediately to mind, Thiers said.

“We thought, ‘Why don’t we try going to the best minds in Illinois, the best in the country, really, and see what they can come up with?’” Thiers said.

The concept of a blitzkrieg-fast marketing competition isn’t new. Thiers said she learned through a business mentor in Philadelphia of a similar effort called the Thunderbird Competition.

“I said if they can do it, we can do it,” Thiers said.

In November, Sittercity approached Kellogg officials with the proposal, and won swift approval to publicize the tournament. At 5 p.m. on Jan. 21, company officials came to Kellogg, explained the mission to all 10 teams of students and told them they had to be back at the school at 5 p.m. the next day.

The results were fantastic, Thiers said, with each team producing good campaign ideas.

The criteria

Thiers said each submission had to be unique; it had to be feasible; it had to have commercial potential; and the entire submission had to be well rounded out by the way teams actually presented it.

“The best campaigns are the ones who reach huge amounts of people for small amounts of money. That works very well for start-up (companies),” she said. “So we asked, ‘Is it completely pie in the sky, or can we implement it?’ and ‘Could we unroll this event, and would people respond?’”

The team that fulfilled the criteria best was that of John Stoops and Katie Gerdes, who entered under the team name “Adventures in Babysitting.”

Thiers said Sittercity was intrigued with the team’s central concept of holding a Sitter Bowl, to be held around the time of the Superbowl, at which baby-sitters from across the country would compete in events such as story reading and diaper changing.

“Ultimately we viewed our audience as the press, TV, newspapers and magazines, because by creating a buzz in the press the next thing you know, the idea is out there in the public,” Stoop said.

He and Gerdes envisioned bring celebrities into the event as well. They also pitched to Sittercity the idea of taking over the city of Storkville, Maine, for one day, renaming it Sittercity USA and providing thousands of baby-sitters to residents for that day.

Oscar-night nursery

The third idea was to have an Oscar night nursery at the site of the Academy Award ceremony where Oscar nominees and attendees could leave their children with Sittercity’s child-care providers.

“A lot of this came from the two of us bouncing ideas back and forth, from our understanding of pop culture and events,” Stoops said.

The second-place team of Kate Streit, Jessica Nam Kim and Tamara Prather, collectively the “lucky Ladies,” presented a multi-faceted concept based in large part on the team quizzing everyone they knew who had parenting knowledge.

Some too ambitious

“We had a lot of great ideas, but some were the kind you might need a multimillion dollar budget to complete. We wanted something that would be feasible,” Streit said. “So although none of us know about children at this stage of life, we spent the evening talking to friends and family about the challenges of finding baby-sitters, how they have found them.

“We regrouped in the morning, brainstormed for about two or three hours and settled on an issue to flesh out.”

The Lucky Ladies proposed putting clear plexiglass boxes around cities, with signs announcing the arrival of Sittercity. Inside the boxes would be people acting out scenes such as dining out or having a night on the town, asking people to remember what it was like before they had children.

The team also recommended that Sittercity build a customer loyalty program in which regular customers would get some type of reward for repeated use of the service –and for binding in new customers.

Stoops and Gerdes won \$1,000, while Streit, Kim and Prather won \$500. Both also received plaques, as did third-place winners Daniel Speckman and Leonardo Bastera.

Speckman and Bastera used the idea of interactive movie theater ads, in which an actor in the audience would respond to a movie advertisement about Sittercity.

Thiers said her company will look seriously at using all or parts of each of the winners’ proposals, as well as those of the strong fourth-place finisher. She said Sittercity definitely would like to continue holding the Best of the Buzz context with Kellogg.

If so, the successors to the men in gray flannel suits will have a chance to prove their collective worth once again.