

AT
SOME
POINT

BY NINA McALISTER

DURING A STUDENT'S TENURE AT THE HANKAMER SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, MOST BUSINESS MAJORS WILL SPEND TIME STUDYING AND SOLVING CASE STUDIES IN A VARIETY OF DISCIPLINES RANGING FROM ACCOUNTING AND FINANCE TO MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING. BUSINESS STUDENTS MAJORING IN PROFESSIONAL SELLING OR SPORTS SPONSORSHIP AND SALES (S3) GAIN THE ADVANTAGE OF TAKING A COURSE CALLED CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT WHERE THEY WRITE, PRESENT AND SOLVE THEIR OWN CASE STUDY AS OPPOSED TO ONLY ANALYZING TEXTBOOK CASE STUDIES.

LEARNING  IN 360°

CONNECTING WITH CUSTOMERS

The Customer Relationship Management course, also known as Sales Force Management, is taught by Jeff Tanner, associate dean of Research and Faculty Development and professor of Marketing, and is offered during the spring semester. As part of the class, Tanner assigns a project in which students work in groups to solve a real organization's customer relationship management (CRM) challenge. The idea is to help students not only learn about the importance of developing a relationship with customers, but more importantly, to learn the strategy behind engaging customers and maintaining and managing long-term relationships with customers.

In conjunction with the case study, students also learn the technical skills needed to manage relationships through using CRM software, which many businesses and

organizations rely on. Most students in either the S3 or Professional Sales programs are first introduced to CRM software in their introductory sales class, as well as in their internships.

"CRM software includes the customer database containing all transactional data, contact information and other relevant data," Tanner said. "When used with a sales force, the software should include calendaring and reporting functions. The software should make managing the relationship with the customer easier. We've got to incorporate the functionality of the software into the class because it is what makes CRM possible when dealing with thousands of customers."

One of Tanner's former students, senior Professional Sales major Colyn Squires, agrees. Squires said that learning about CRM software and different ways to apply the software in her career was the single most beneficial thing she took from the class.

"CRM SYSTEMS MAKE THE LIFE OF A SALESPERSON MUCH EASIER," SQUIRES SAID. "THEY CAN LOOK BACK AND SEE ALL CONTACT THAT THEY HAVE HAD WITH CLIENTS, LOOK FOR TRENDS TO HELP THEM MEET CUSTOMER NEEDS AND KEEP CUSTOMERS HAPPY."



Because the course is dedicated to the topic of managing customer relationships, Squires was able to explore several types of software and learn both the benefits and potential pitfalls. In fact, she only found one such pitfall in "the time that it takes to input everything. Besides that, I am so glad that I got the chance to learn about the software and practice using it."

Squires added she would feel "ahead of the game" when she begins working full time next year in sales.

"I have already used the software, know shortcuts and will be able to input information to get the results I need out of the software quickly, like right before meeting with a client," she said.

Learning how to use CRM systems and software is just one part of Tanner's course. As mentioned previously, Tanner's students also work in groups to write a case study based on the way an actual corporation or business organization approaches customer strategy and CRM strategy.

"In this class, they identify and attempt to solve strategic customer relationship issues for real organizations," Tanner said. "They create these case studies on real organizations using real challenges and, when possible, working with management."

Squires worked with a group that wrote a case study on the McLane Company, and the group conducted online research

about the company and interviewed a sales manager. For Squires, the process of writing the case was one of the most difficult yet most rewarding parts of Tanner's course.

"Writing our own case was difficult, and I learned how to work in a group better," she said. "The class in general really challenged me to think differently and how to approach situations from a management point of view."

A classmate of Squires' and fellow Professional Sales major, Luke Reichenstein agreed. Reichenstein's group wrote a case study on Speedtracs, a company that manufactures and sells athletic training equipment, based in Atlanta, Ga. Reichenstein's group was able to take an interactive approach to the research step of the project by visiting the company and meeting with executives and employees. This company engagement helped Reichenstein better understand the importance of using customer relationship strategy on a regular basis.

"I was able to see how an effective CRM system can paint a picture of what a potential customer's needs would be, which helps the salesperson narrow down search parameters for potential customers," Reichenstein said.

For Reichenstein, Squires and several other students, taking Tanner's course opened their eyes to the process of managing and nurturing customer relationships from a strategic standpoint.

"Customer service and sales are one in the same in my mind," Reichenstein said. "A salesperson's job is to help the customer find the best product for their needs and help them utilize that product to its full potential; that is where CRM is so useful. This class helped me learn how to use the system and helped me learn to look at the type of system more strategically."

Squires agreed. "I loved the class. It was a class that really challenged my thinking. That's actually something I really enjoy about the pro sales major overall; they challenge us to come up with our own thoughts as opposed to memorizing and regurgitating facts. We had to contact a lot of professionals for our different assignments, which always helps to expand our network."

Through the course's interactive approach using CRM software and writing case studies, Tanner hopes the course will continue preparing students for their future careers.

"Given this course's place in the curriculum, I hope students are able to take away a fairly sophisticated toolkit for the design and implementation of customer strategy, as well as an understanding of the theoretical foundation that underpins customer strategy so that they can adapt these tools and their strategies to fit the contexts they find themselves facing," Tanner said.

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