Houston PMBA project about more than marketing

May 15, 2013

For almost 30 years, the Periwinkle Foundation has offered children with cancer one of the most powerful healing therapies in existence: Fun.



The Periwinkle Foundation hosts a summer camp and other programs for children with cancer. Last semester, a Houston-based class of PMBA students partnered with the foundation to develop strategies to improve marketing, development and community engagement.

The Houston-based foundation hosts an annual summer camp for children undergoing cancer treatment that enables the pint-sized patients to enjoy a week filled with all the traditional camp activities, from horseback riding and archery to fishing, swimming and even ziplining. Periwinkle also hosts weekend camps for teens and families and monthly programs at Texas Children's Cancer Center and Hematology Center, all dedicated to meeting the social and emotional needs of children living with cancer.

On an annual basis, the foundation touches the lives of more 4,000 children, teens and family members, but like a lot of nonprofits, Periwinkle doesn't always have the time or resources to devote to strategic marketing.

That’s where a Houston-based class of Freeman School PMBA students comes in.

Last fall, Yiorgos Bakamitsos, professor of practice and assistant dean for executive education, reached out to Periwinkle and offered the consulting services of students in his Topics in Marketing class. Over the course of the six-week module, the students met with representatives from Periwinkle and developed a host of recommendations to meet the organization’s wide-ranging needs.

“They wanted to, for example, grow their donor base,” says Giovanni Edwards (MBA ’13), one of the students in the class. “They wanted to make better use of technology. They wanted to improve their direct mail campaign. They wanted to increase volunteer support and turnout. It was a really nice consulting project.”

Bakamitsos has put his students to work on experiential learning projects with nonprofits for more than a decade, but he says the Periwinkle project stands out both for the commitment of the students to the organization’s mission and the quality of their recommendations.

“The recommendations were really excellent,” Bakamitsos says. “One of Periwinkle’s board members who came to see the presentations does marketing for HP, and her comment to me was that their work was very professional and that she sometimes wished she would get that kind of work from the people who work for her, which was a very nice compliment for the students.”

Working in teams of five, the students came up with ideas that ranged from simple and straightforward to surprisingly sophisticated given the project’s short timeline.



In addition to its annual summer camp, above, the Periwinkle Foundation also hosts weekend camps for teens and families and monthly programs at Texas Children's Cancer Center.

One team highlighted the importance of color branding, and encouraged the foundation to be more consistent in its use of periwinkle blue—the foundation's official color—in its logos and marketing materials. Another team used census data to generate a heat map showing areas in Houston with high concentrations of charitable donors. The team then showed the foundation how to use that information improve its direct mail campaigns.

One of the best received ideas was Edwards' proposal for the creation of Periwinkle Fellows, a new program to expand and enhance volunteer support. The fellows program would enable young professionals in Houston to gain experience and build their resumes by leading volunteer projects for the foundation. Periwinkle in turn would receive valuable professional services while at the same time building name recognition in the local business community.

Doug Suggitt, executive director of the foundation, says the fellows program was just one of many ideas suggested by the class that Periwinkle hopes to implement in the near future.

“We were tremendously satisfied with the project,” Suggitt says. “I would say the vast majority of the recommendations that came from the students will be utilized by the foundation. We’re truly a more dynamic organization thanks to Tulane University.”

While the students say they enjoyed the chance to put their skills to work for a real-world client, the fact that the client was an organization like Periwinkle made this project that much more special.

“We would have worked just as hard if the client had been Exxon or Apple, but I think our connection to the organization and our satisfaction from the impact was very different,” Edwards says. “It felt better because it meant something.”

“There are definitely projects within the MBA program that are kind of draining and exhausting, but this was one that I wish we could have had more time to work on,” adds Kelli Stilley (MBA ’13). “We felt like we actually made a difference in the organization, so it was a lot of fun.”