

MEETING THE NEEDS OF SMALL MANUFACTURERS

Since opening in 2002, OSU's New Product Development Center has already garnered two prestigious awards for its success with small- and medium-sized manufacturers in Oklahoma.

In 2006, the *Oklahoma Journal Record* presented the NPDC with the Innovator of the Year Award for work with Klutts Equipment Co. of Muskogee on the Gon-topper, a machine to help load and

unload railroad gondola cars.

In 2005, the University Economic Development Association presented the NPDC with its Award for Excellence in Technology Commercialization for developing the Gon-topper prototype for Klutts.

Sponsored by the College of Engineering, Architecture and Technology, the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and the OSU Center for Innovation and Economic Development, the NPDC brings faculty and students from various engineering and agricultural departments together with Oklahoma manufacturers to provide prototyping assistance. Only existing companies with a new product concept and the potential to generate annual revenues of at least \$1 million and create at least 20 new jobs are eligible.

"Every NPDC project is an investment in the future of Oklahoma," says Larry Hoberock, NPDC co-director and professor and head of OSU's School of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering.

"The NPDC has the potential to bring thousands of new jobs and billions of dollars to our state as small manufacturers look to the center's resources to solve problems and create new opportunities."

However, no matter how innovative its product development, a business must be equally innovative in financing and marketing, says Bill Barfield, NPDC co-director and emeritus professor of OSU's Department of Biosystems and Agricultural Engineering.

To assist in these areas, the NPDC launched the Business Analysis Program and the Marketing Communications Program. The programs combine OSU resources in communications, marketing, finance and management to help propel participating companies to the next level.

Through the Business and Market Analysis Program, agricultural economics students prepare in-depth reviews of the current business environment and develop business plans for participating companies.

"In the class that Rodney Holcomb and I teach, our students produce financial impact and market research

reports as part of business plans for companies," says Dan Tilley, professor of agricultural economics.

"Our goal is to teach students how to help small manufacturers better organize, finance, manage and market their companies in the competitive global marketplace."

Graduate student Erich Wehrenberg was part of a team last spring that created a business marketing plan for Stillwater-based Terraverde Technologies. The students' 40-page business plan referenced company documents and interviews with the owners.

"This was a superior course," Wehrenberg says. "Sitting across the table from our clients and realizing their livelihood could depend on our effort and ingenuity leaves no doubt about our responsibility to them."

After the business plans are presented, students in the Marketing Communications Program directed by Cindy Blackwell, assistant professor of agricultural communications, create marketing tools such as websites, logos, brochures, advertisements, stationery and in-store and trade show displays.



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“A lot of times, small companies have lots of marketing starts and stops,” Blackwell says. “Even when they have a plan, they often have to implement it in a piecemeal fashion as funding becomes available.”

Working with clients, students develop a consistent communications package reflective of the company’s image while also offering low-cost, high-quality marketing materials and products in a print-ready format.

Besides interacting with clients, students get to add samples and awards to their portfolios. One student group from the fall 2005 campaigns class recently won first place in a national student communications competition for its marketing campaign for Tonkawa Foundry.

Since 2005, when former NPDC staff members Cristen Leimer and Autumn Hood started the marketing communications component, some 100 students from several Oklahoma universities have completed 24 projects.

“Working on a communications campaign for a real-life client was one of the most valuable experiences I had at OSU,” says Dustin Mielke, a 2006 agricultural communications graduate. “Our team learned to work together while assembling materials and communicating with our client. The class really allowed us to integrate the skills we learn as agricultural communications students.”

Craig Zuege, vice president of Texoma Tack Co. Inc. of Durant, Okla., says the website, ads and other products created by senior Sally Bauer during her summer internship with the NPDC would have cost his company thousands

of dollars if done by a professional firm. **“I would value this service at \$25,000 to \$75,000,” Zuege says.**

Similarly, the financial reports and strategies resulting from agricultural economics class projects are invaluable to small business owners. “You would not believe how helpful they are,” Zuege adds. “I’m working on a federal grant and loan application using the business plan developed by the students.”

When Encompass Tool & Machine of Ponca City, Okla., closed, Kansas business owner Paul Maples and Galaxy Tool Corporation bought the company and rehired the employees.

“I wanted a new look for the company,” says Maples, president. “But if it hadn’t been for this program I wouldn’t have new brochures or a new website because I’ve been so busy with sales and getting the business up and running. **This gave us the time we needed to grow and focus on various areas of the business.**”

Janet Herren, a 2006 agricultural communications graduate, says working with clients through the class project was an eye-opening experience.

“It made me want to work harder because I knew that my work was affecting more than just my GPA. The campaigns class is truly a hands-on experience that extends beyond the classroom and gives students the opportunity to make a real impact.” **O**

JANET VARNUM

For more information, visit npdc.okstate.edu

The business analysis and marketing communications components of OSU’s New Product Development Center benefit Oklahoma businesses. Left, are senior Sally Bauer, Dan Tilley, Craig Zuege of Texoma Tack, Cindy Blackwell and Larry Hoberock. Opposite page, from left, are Pepper Jo’s Farms owners JoVita and Randy Black, senior Jennifer Nance and Tilley.



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