

Marketing project benefits UMHB students, Central Texas churches

June 29, 2007

Posted: 6/29/07

Marketing project benefits UMHB students, Central Texas churches

By George Henson

Staff Writer

BELTON—A semester-long partnership between marketing students at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor and five churches in Williamson Baptist Association received a passing grade from all involved.

Clint Anderson, director of missions for the association, initially conceived the project. The first semester of the year, the students helped the association with market research, with an eye toward putting a marketing plan together for the association the second semester.

“I was going to use the association as the spring project as well, but then I thought it would be more important for the churches to have that opportunity,” he said, noting everything worked out even better than he would have hoped.

“It’s really a good deal for everybody,” he said. “The students get a project, and the churches get free marketing advice.”

ChrisAnn Merriman, assistant professor of management and marketing at UMHB, also made the trip to Georgetown to present a seminar for all the pastors in the association on marketing so the pastors would have a general knowledge of the subject.

Churches chosen for the projects were fairly young churches in growing communities, Anderson said. Sonterra Fellowship in Jarrell, Lakeline Church and Hill Country Fellowship in Leander, CrossPointe Community Church in Taylor and LifePointe Fellowship in Hutto were each chosen to work with a team of three to four students to develop a marketing plan that would enable the congregations to better reach their communities.

Merriman said her students enjoyed the opportunity to put their classroom knowledge of demographics and marketing strategies to work in real-life situations. "It's a lot more interesting for them to work with these churches than it would be to put together a marketing plan for some fictitious company out of a textbook," she said.

Stephanie Boyd, a student who worked with Lakeline Church in Leander, agreed.

"Most of our projects had been hypothetical—pretend—so this was an opportunity to actually work for an organization that was truly going to employ at least some of the strategies we suggested for them," she said.

That they were working to help a church rather than a company with a product to sell was another intriguing dynamic, Boyd said.

"It was interesting to put together a marketing plan for a church where you weren't trying to sell a product to customers, but rather making sure that people who came felt welcome," she said.

To that end, Boyd's team sent in "secret visitors" to the church and then interviewed them about how they were welcomed. His team also attended

services and talked with members.

“You can’t make a strategy for a church you didn’t know anything about,” she explained. Working with the congregation, staff and Pastor Brian Lightsey was one of the things that separated the project from a hypothetical situation, she said.

“Having them involved, and just the opportunity to work with a client and having their feedback was really beneficial,” she said.

That thought was echoed by Elizabeth Vein, who also worked on the Lakeline team. “It was eye-opening to have someone actually looking across the table at you and asking you what you should do,” she said.

Since Lakeline meets at Leander High School, one of the team’s primary suggestions was to make the most of that opportunity, Vein said. The team suggested to the congregation that their meeting at the school gave them a location in town everyone was aware of and also made it more appealing to students. They suggested that reaching those students would in turn help the church reach their families.

Leander is a rapidly growing community, and the team that worked with Hill Country Fellowship suggested that the church really work hard to meet the many new residents.

“Most churches don’t think of themselves as businesses,” student Lindsey Cockerell pointed out. “But they still need to make sure their name is out there—especially in Leander, where there are so many people who are new residents.”

While the church already was securing names and addresses of new move-ins, the team suggested expanding the outreach efforts to include welcome baskets. The gift baskets included not only information about the church, but also an area map and compendium of area activities. They also

suggested that church members be given business card-like communication pieces with church information that they could give to new people they met.

Working with the church helped her see that working with churches after graduation also was a possibility.

“I’d never thought of it before, but now I think it’s a possibility because churches need help on how they can best reach out to people and grow the kingdom of God, and I’m thinking now I might like to help with that,” she said.

The pastors were grateful for the students’ help.

“It gave us some fresh eyes and helped our leadership to see things from a different perspective,” Lightsey, pastor of Lakeline Church, said. He said the students also helped to remind the congregation of some of things they had previously thought of but never put in place. One of the things the team suggested was not to rely as much as mailed communication pieces, but to gain a greater visibility in the community through service projects.

Darrell Koop, pastor of Hill Country Fellowship, agreed that it was a worthwhile partnership. “They were able to come in as outsiders and give us a view and a feel of how other people see us,” he said. The church is already working to put a couple of the team’s suggestions into motion such as remodeling the church’s website and renting a highway billboard to enhance the church’s visibility in the community.

“It’s a free service that helped both us and the students,” Lightsey said. “It was a total win-win situation. And of course they want a good grade, so they worked really hard.”

Anderson noted he already has churches signing up for the next opportunity.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Baptist churches, in Texas, the BGCT, the nation and around the world.