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Students come up with feasible proposals for Wanin Industries, which supplies Pere Ocean water dispensers. Wanin Industries' Mr Tan (left) feels that the idea students Ms Lim and Mr Ng came up with - an effervescent Vitamin C tablet - is easy to implement and will be well received by younger consumers. PHOTO: AIDAN LOO.

MEN looking dapper in their coats and ties and women dressed smartly in their power suits seated around a table, conferring and deliberating. That is probably the image evoked when one thinks of meetings that involve coming up with the company's latest It product.

However, the collaboration between Wanin Industries - which started out with the Pere Ocean brand and pioneered the bulk bottled water and cooler rental industry in Singapore - and SMU bucks the trend. The firm, which was established in 1986, wanted to find out the young generation's perspective of Pere Ocean. Wanin Industries was referred to UOB-SMU Asian Enterprise Institute (UOB-SMU AEI) by a business adviser at SME Centre (Spring Singapore). UOB-SMU AEI then introduced Wanin Industries to SMU-X course, which was launched in 2015.

The firm took up the opportunity to collaborate with the university in one of its courses - The Design of Business - under SMU-X. The Design of Business is a capstone course that all business school undergraduates take in their final year. In fact, the company was so keen that it set aside a budget of S\$50,000-S\$100,000 for this partnership.

Wanin Industries Pte Ltd's manager Eugene Tan says: "The students are younger and have a different perspective, and that is something that is very beneficial to SMEs. Especially in a market like this, where the economy is bad, we don't have the ammunition - like a couple of hundred thousand dollars - to throw at the big consulting firms, unlike the MNCs." He adds that the students are actually more in tune with the market than most people give them credit for.

"They are about to enter the workforce and are within our target age group. We want to know where our brand stands with them, and how they perceive us. (It is imperative) to engage them and find out if the new projects that we implement will dilute our brand identity."

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Asean is on a growth path, and Singapore, being an education hub, attracts a large number of international students every year. Hence, the project manager, who is in his early 30s, says that by reconnecting with the younger generation here, there is the possibility of overseas students taking Wanin Industries' Pere Ocean brand back to their home country after graduation.

Effervescent idea

Therefore, the students in The Design of Business class were divided into six teams of four-to-six members, and were tasked with formulating business plans for Wanin Industries. After months of refinement and the perusal of six proposals, the firm felt that a few ideas, such as the "effervescent tablet", were feasible.

Twenty-four-year-old finance and marketing graduate, Sandy Lim, who was part of the team that came up with the Vitamin C effervescent tablet idea, says: "We suggested an additional component that is attachable to the current water dispenser that Pere Ocean supplies to the corporate clients. This component will contain the different flavoured Vitamin C effervescent tablets."

A survey was conducted with the company's existing corporate clients and it was found that the target group was partial to fruity flavours. The students then made a further suggestion to incorporate these flavours into the Vitamin C effervescent tablet.

Finance and accounting graduate Bryan Ng, 25, who was Ms Lim's teammate, says: "The whole brainstorming process took around three to four weeks, right up to the mid-term stage which was week seven. We came up with the idea when we tried to research more into consumers' needs in today's market."

The team narrowed (the target group) to the corporate consumer as that is where the bulk of the company's revenue came from. The team made the proposal to Wanin Industries as more health-conscious millennials are entering the workforce and this allows Pere Ocean to connect with this generation with minimal startup cost without neglecting its existing group of customers. In fact, the firm is currently in talks with a supplier to kickstart this project, and the new product is projected to roll out in about a year's time.

Mr Tan says: "(The idea) promotes a healthy lifestyle, which the government is pushing for as well ... We strive to be the preferred regional supplier for healthy beverage solutions." He adds that the firm likes the idea because it complements what the firm does. It is also easy to implement - a simple matter of attaching one extra bracket on top of the dispenser.

Mr Ng says: "Most of the groups wanted to go with a big idea, and one of our four ideas was also quite bold. But there were issues that come with big bold ideas that an SME would be concerned about. So in the end we decided to look for a more implementable, more practical and feasible idea which was the vitamin idea."

Rick Smith, senior lecturer of strategic management, SMU Lee Kong Chian School of Business, who taught The Design of Business course, says: "This course allows students to not only apply their knowledge of business in a real setting, but also put together ideas using a cross-disciplinary approach. In this course, we are not giving the students a problem and asking them to solve it... instead we are sharing a business issue with them and asking them to develop new ideas. In a

way, it turns the traditional education model upside down: Instead of providing answers to a problem or question, it is up to the students to determine the right question to ask."

SMU-X, launched after 3½ years of study and conceptualisation, is not your usual run-of-the-mill course. The brainchild of SMU president, Professor Arnoud De Meyer, the pedagogy allows students to apply a cross-disciplinary approach as they develop/implement innovative solutions for real client projects and allows students to partner firms, work on experiential projects with close mentorship by faculty and the partner company's staff, to help businesses faced with challenges.

Associate Professor Gary Pan, academic director of SMU-X, says: "The world is changing rapidly as we experience a new set of complex urban issues. It is crucial for universities to play a key role in creating and supporting 'smart' ecosystems. This creates a highly skilled workforce ready to react quickly to problems that arise and to proactively create solutions. Often, solutions do not come from any single discipline, but from collaboration between innovators from various disciplines who can see beyond the way the world is to the way it could be."

Growing collaborations

In fact, firms that SMU-X has collaborated with span the gamut - from the private sector (69 per cent) to public (9 per cent) and NGO (22 per cent). Among the private firms, more than half (62 per cent) are SMEs and this is where firms such as Wanin Industries come into the picture.

Mr Tan says: "There are companies working with schools already and we do see collaborations between universities and SMEs growing in the years to come."

Although Wanin Industries' partnership with the students was fruitful, there were also a few expected bumps along the way, as such a collaboration requires commitment from both sides. Ms Lim says: "We understand that (the corporate clients) were really busy, which led to a lack of response and so we weren't able to find out some of their needs and wants, but we continued sending out email, and hoped to get a response from them."

Indubitably, when embarking on such a project, there would be certain issues which have to be handled diplomatically. Wanin Industries manager Mr Tan says that some information may be of a more sensitive nature, and there is a need to check with the management if it can be released. And if it cannot, is there a way to work around it.

This is where UOB-SMU AEI plays its role as a conduit to this programme as it provides management assistance to monitor the progress of the project.

"For example, there is no need to obtain the entire profit and loss balance sheet if what is needed is only the figures for the revenue. This where the UOB-SMU AEI, and the professor of the course, step in to advise both parties on the next course of action so that we can move forward," he adds.

However, on the whole, the experience for both parties was definitely a beneficial one and there were quite a few takeaways.

Mr Ng says that he and his friends have never met up with companies in other courses they took and hence, whatever solutions proposed were hypothetical, and their efficacy unknown.

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Mr Tan concurs and adds that he would recommend to his friends this form of collaboration. He says that his friends, who are second generation F&B owners, face similar problems: a brand name that has been around for quite some time, and the issue of relevance in today's society. For Mr Tan, the overall experience of being the "testbed" was very good - he feels as if the company had the backing of a consultancy group.