

Spotlight



University of Ottawa marketing students stage a dramatic photo-op at a press conference to launch their project, "Making Niger Our Business," where they threw pieces of orange fabric into the air. Orange is the color of Niger's flag and a symbol of famine.

Marketing Makes a Difference

Undergrads at the University of Ottawa work to end famine in Niger.

The famine in the African nation of Niger, caused last summer by a locust plague and drought, received little attention in the press. But the disaster made a strong impression on Guy Laflamme, a marketing professor at the University of Ottawa's School of Management in Ontario, Canada. What better way to address an underserved problem, he thought, than to ask his undergraduate marketing students to think of ways to solve it?

The project, called "Making Niger Our Business," required considerable planning during the summer, when Laflamme had to establish relationships with Nana Aicha Foumakoye, Niger's ambassador to Canada, and the appropriate NGOs. He also had to assure the university that the project's public activities would reflect the school's message and mission.

In the fall of 2005, Laflamme separated the 150 students in his marketing strategy and consumer behavior courses into small groups. He then challenged each group to devise innovative marketing concepts. At the end of October, each group gave a five-minute presenta-

tion on their ideas. The students collectively chose each group's best idea; each group was then responsible for putting its idea into play.

"From a marketing standpoint, it's a big challenge to raise funds for a cause people know very little about, that affects a country 5,000 kilometers away," says Laflamme. To further motivate his students, Laflamme went one step further: He donated his salary for teaching both courses as their startup capital.

Most students, says Laflamme, spent close to 100 hours working on the project over the semester. They created a Web site and an imaginative 30-second television spot that aired on local television. They also recruited other students to create a "human chain" that spanned the 1.2 kilometers between the center of campus and the Embassy of Niger. Their two-hour vigil received a wealth of coverage by local media.

Students also formed agreements with local pubs to donate entrance

fees and a percentage of a night's proceeds to the project. They held "positive demonstrations" in front of local media offices, where they held up signs that thanked their donors. Journalists walking into the buildings not only noticed their signs; they came out to cover the story.

So far, Laflamme's students have collected \$250,000 in hospital equipment and raised more than \$25,000. He expects them to raise \$40,000 more before the end of the school year. In June, he and five student representatives, chosen by their peers, will travel to Niger to oversee the distribution of the equipment

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and funds, including the construction of water wells and latrines near three schools in the city of Tahoua. They also will work with the University of Niamey in

Niger's capital to develop campaigns to educate the public about topics such as nutrition and birth control.

"I hope to repeat the Niger experience year after year with my undergraduate students. I also invite other universities to obtain the template for the Niger project," says Laflamme. "Students can learn to create solutions that will have sustainable impact."

For information on "Making Niger Our Business"—and to see the students' 30-second television ad—visit www.makingnigerourbusiness.com. 