



Wednesday, March 3, 2004

## Students create marketing plan for Rec Center

By *Jeff Samoray*, OU Web Writer

In the five years since Oakland University's **Recreation and Athletics Center** first opened, the competition among area fitness centers has grown significantly. Four other facilities are now located within five miles of the campus, creating a number of choices for campus and community members. How does the Rec Center measure up against the competition? OU students not only evaluated the Rec Center's standing, they also helped provide them with a viable, strategic marketing plan.

The comprehensive, 72-page document was developed last fall by Maren Claus, Petros Panayioto and Michael Wheaton, students in Marketing 560 (Marketing Management), one of the core courses in OU's **Master of Business Administration** program. The class project required students to select an existing business or product, gather data and analyze specific strengths and weaknesses, then develop a full-scale marketing plan to help meet established business objectives. Finally, the plan was presented to the businesses for their use.

"The objective is to have the students understand and appreciate the complexities of marketing and learn what it takes to develop a plan how to create a marketing strategy," said Associate Professor of Marketing John Henke, who teaches the course. "The Rec Center analysis was very timely. Several years ago some undergraduate students did some research on the Rec Center's advertising campaign. Last semester, their staff felt that it was a good time to do a reality check, so they were quite amenable to the students' research. The fact that the students had an abundance of data is reflective of the generous support of Rec Center staff."

Among the issues the students examined were competitive pressures from other area fitness facilities, including their products and services, how current users interact with the Rec Center, why potential users choose to participate or not in Rec Center functions, and the Rec Center's organizational structure, existing marketing strategy and state of resources.

Some of the Rec Center's strengths the students identified were its low user fees, convenience for on-campus users and modern facility design and architecture. Limited parking capacity and time required for facility entry and exit were among the weaknesses. The plan also identified various opportunities to gain customers and competitive advantage.

"The marketing plan is a good tool to help us identify some issues and create strategies for addressing them," said Director of Campus Recreation Greg Jordan. "We're reviewing the plan now, particularly as we're coming up on our two-year cycle of membership plans. We've already used some of the data the students compiled on fees in our Campus Recreation newsletter. At times, we receive statements that Rec Center fees are too high. But the data the students compiled clearly shows that we're very affordable, which helps reinforce why Rec Center membership is a good choice."

MKT 560 students analyze and develop marketing plans for a diverse group of businesses. One group devised a plan for an a cappella singing group. Others created plans for an air limo service in Pontiac, the new Volkswagen Thetan and Delphi's satellite radio receivers.

"These are real-world projects, not games," Henke said. "The marketing plans aren't just written and forgotten about, either. One semester a group of students created a plan for the Chevy Avalanche, and they felt they found some mistakes in General Motors' own approach. The students went back and gave a presentation to GM, and they picked up on some of the students' ideas and incorporated them into their plan."

"What's great about this assignment is that the students take theory and apply it to practice. It's an outreach to the business community, and businesses have the opportunity to learn about our students and programs. In addition, the students learn about teamwork and taking a very practical approach to business problems. It's also good preparation for entering the job market."

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Article Start Date: Thursday, June 2, 2005