

WSU Students Conduct Market Assessments for Local Businesses
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When Richland startup Wave ID opened its doors in December, the new firm's marketing strategy already had the benefit of insights from local business students. Wave ID, which develops wireless communication system to track items, received market research results and recommendations from graduate business students at Washington State University's Tri-Cities campus.

Wave ID is one of 50 local businesses that have benefited from the WSU student work. WSU business professor Pam Henderson started the market assessment program in 1994 as a way to give her students more real-life experiences. "These projects give our students a way to apply the tools they learn in their MBA and undergraduate business classes," Henderson said. "Students become very personally invested when they know their work is going to be used by a real company."

Henderson defined marketing as learning about your customers and competitors, then translating that knowledge into a strategy that gives your product or service a competitive edge.

Under Henderson's direction, students collect market data aimed at answering specific questions posed by the requesting companies. In addition to gathering facts such as market size or dollar value, students interview industry experts, customers and competitors. "They conduct focus groups or in-depth personal interviews to get insights into what customers want in products or services," Henderson said. Some student teams attend trade shows and other industry events as part of their research.

Based on their findings, students make research-based recommendations to the business owners. Recommendations can include market entry strategies, target market selection, product design modifications, promotional and distribution strategies and pricing guidance.

"Business owners have been very pleased with the quality and value of the work," Henderson said.

Curt Carrender, Wave ID's chief technical officer, agrees. "We're using several pieces of information from the student team, including market size and business potential, in our presentations to venture capitalists," Carrender said. "Their numbers gave us another credible source to confirm our own, earlier market research," he said.

"One of the most valuable recommendations the students gave us was to focus on a small version of our system, a hand-held unit," Carrender said. The students

also identified a significant market that Wave ID hadn't thought of--tagging fire fighters to locate them in smoke-filled areas.

Henderson's students are divided into teams, each assessing a market for a total of three to five companies during a semester. Henderson tries to match student backgrounds and interest with the company's line of business. "Many of my students, especially in the MBA program, have substantial experience in various aspects of business and management," she said. "And some have connections with the specific products or services being marketed."

At the end of the class semester, the student teams present their findings and recommendations to the business owners in person. Every business also receives a detailed written report.

Many businesses seeking help are fledgling ventures whose entrepreneurial owners want a more solid marketing framework to get off on the right foot. Or, they are established companies trying to make decisions about expanding or modifying their products or services.

WSU charges a fee that supports the program and covers expenses that students incur. The studies have been subsidized largely by local economic development programs, with some costs covered by the recipient businesses. Business owners must be available to the student team for about 10 to 15 hours throughout the semester, including attending the final presentation.