



Design Collaboration across Physical and Cultural Borders with Global Impact

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Introduction

Creative collaborations are highly effective means whereby educators and business owners can gain mutual benefits while focusing on social responsibility. The presented teaching projects combined student education in sustainability and social responsibility with design research coupled with projected business entrepreneurship. Sustainable, mission-based businesses are being developed by small business owners around the globe. Even large businesses all offer some message or on-line statement about corporate social responsibility (CSR). But according to McPherson (2014), a socially conscious mission in itself is not enough to inspire customers. Customers look for social consciousness at the core of the business. Once invested with the company based on mission and vision, customers seek strong design, quality and value constructs. This is good motivation for students to understand the importance of aligning socially responsible missions with product lines.

Purpose

The design collaboration presents two case studies in which university students designed apparel and accessory product lines for small companies seeking to make an impact through empowering women facing social challenges. Creative collaboration projects began with two start-up companies. The first company was based in Nepal and focused the challenge on translating hand woven textile product being produced in the region into marketable accessory products. The company mission was to empower and support women through establishing gainful employment while removing the risk of having to sell themselves or their children into the sex trade. The design challenge was to help create a unified product line with global appeal that could be sold in the heart of the tourism centers of Nepal and through e-commerce. The second project was the development of a children's apparel collection to be manufactured domestically by a newly formed production facility consisting of a group of female refugees that had been relocated to the United States and adopted by a local church. The business developer and owner established the company with the goal to generate income and a means of creating livelihood for the women currently settling in the United States. Both projects required fashion design students to understand political, logistic, and production limitations of each company and their employee base and to design and present a product line created within those constraints.

Project Benefits

The benefits, challenges and business potential were presented to the students in preparation for each project. Students were asked to research background related to each company's cause or

mission statement, including global or regional challenges for each group of workers. Once they adequately understood the social challenge and mission of each company, their project goal was to create a product line that represented the needs of each company. Student learning outcomes were established to 1) enhance knowledge of and empathy for people groups enduring social challenge and hardship, 2) exercise creative and innovative design skills within a defined market segment, and 3) assist in entrepreneurial business strategy and product development for targeted businesses.

Procedure

Project guidelines varied for each company. Students designed both functional and innovative woven accessories for Nepal women and simplified and easy to construct children's apparel for domestic production for refugee women. Presentation formats, however, were consistent. Technical illustrations, textile swatches and presentation boards were used for both projects. Students completing the projects were enrolled in a senior level portfolio development class and included project work in their end of semester on-line portfolios.

Project components included presenting respective project goals, a presentation of company profiles and mission statements, a presentation of student project sheets, completed projects and project boards, an analysis of each projects' success from student and company perspective, and the discussion of impact on student's global and cultural thought and awareness as a result of the project.

Conclusions

Students were able to create innovative product lines for both companies, exercising design and technical illustration skills learned in previous classes. Product lines varied significantly from classmate to classmate. Board layout and presentation format varied by student and by project. A summary of student responses to the projects revealed a strong level of empathy and desire to help build successful companies. Students were engaged, interested in exploring future opportunities, and invested. Several students indicated that these two projects were the highlight of their college design experiences. Company owners were grateful for the student involvement, excited about some of the "very usable" designs, and asked about future involvement. Overall, engaging students in global social issues and encouraging them to assist in identifying or developing solutions for such issues is both meaningful and impactful in their lives. The hope is that this investment stays with them as they enter the global industry and where possible, they become the change agent needed on the social front in the design industry.

References

McPherson, S. (2014, March 18). Stylish and sustainable: How brands are getting it right. Retrieved March 28, 2017 from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanmcpherson/2014/03/18/stylish-and-sustainable-how-brands-are-getting-it-right/#3b231b649cd0>