

Former Vol returns to school for business advice

The College of Business Administration's Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation develops entrepreneurial talent in its graduate and undergraduate students for the benefit of East Tennessee. As part of the full-time MBA's entrepreneurship and innovation concentration, students collaborate annually with local not-for-profit organizations and Tech 2020 start-up companies to experience entrepreneurial challenges and "walk in the footsteps" of business leaders. The business school has two compelling interests — an educational experience for MBA students and outreach to the community.

Company: Voices Heard Media was founded in 2007 by Will Overstreet, a former football and academic star at the University of Tennessee. Overstreet returned to UT after playing football with the NFL's Atlanta Falcons to earn his MBA degree; he graduated in December 2006.

Overstreet saw the need to address a critical communications disconnect between the public and a personality or a brand.

Voices Heard Media developed proprietary software for sports call-in shows that allowed customers to engage the host with users — readers, listeners, viewers or fans. The technology converts user input — such as questions and comments — that a columnist, radio host or sports figure can respond to in

VOICES HEARD MEDIA

CEO: Will Overstreet, CEO

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2450 E.J. Chapman Drive
Knoxville, TN 37996

Telephone: 678-938-1556

Web site: voicesheardmedia.net

real-time without requiring Web or phone screeners.

Opportunity: Voices Heard Media desired research to better understand why current users were using the service and to help determine new and expanded markets where personalized feedback between audiences and a personality/host is important.

Students: Ted Ciuba, Drew Davenport, Tony Runyan and Lindsay Bennett, who served as project manager. After their December 2008 graduation, Runyan accepted a position with Voices Heard Media and Bennett with SmartBank. Both firms are new, regional entrepreneurial start-ups. Faculty adviser was Glenn Swift.

Client partners: Will Overstreet, Voices Heard Media founder and CEO; Chris Van Beke, Voices Heard Media COO; and Geoff Robson, director, Tech 2020 Center for Entrepreneurial Growth.

Approach: The UT team devoted 390 hours to a proven problem-solv-

ing framework of engagement, baselining, conducting research, benchmarking best practices and making recommendations with predictable outcomes.

Key findings: In its research phase, the team discovered that current customers are using the service because Voices Heard Media helps them better connect to, be more relevant with, and better respond to their end-users.

The team identified several factors that are critical if Voices Heard Media is going to expand beyond its current market:

- Continue being responsive to customers' needs in areas such as technical support.

- Ensure that the Web-based graphic interface is user-friendly and meets the unique applications of specific users.

- Expand the service to accept comments — not just questions — from end-users.

The students identified the best markets for expansion as sports franchises, media companies and radio and television talk-shows. Applications in politics and corporate investor relations were more long-term; they desired more proof of concept before considering the service.

"The MBA team did a great job of working closely with Will and his team to quickly absorb the essence of this market opportunity. They quickly added value by reaching out to the market and prospective

customers," Robson said. "The team functioned as an additional set of eyes and ears into what the market and these customers needed most in this area, resulting in specific recommendations for Voices Heard Media."

Beyond the factors identified above for expansion, the team provided these additional recommendations: develop a demo that explains the service and includes customer testimonials that can be used when marketing the concept; offer the concept only as a branded service, not as generic technology; and offer customers two approaches for payment, either licensing the technology or advertising on the user-accessed interface.

Lessons learned: "This experience provided the team with applied learning and valuable lessons into such areas as the creation and maintenance of customer relationships, the evolution of business development, and the significance of personal networking," Runyan said. "Since I have joined the company, we have followed through on each of the recommendations made by our MBA team. We have begun presenting to customers using our new demo and audio/video testimonials."

Case Study is provided by the University of Tennessee College of Business Administration. For more information, contact Cindy Raines at raines1@utk.edu.