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UW students pitched their export campaign for Chinese brew in Beijing

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The next time you order China's most popular beer, give a toast to four University of Washington MBA students.

The UW students bested seven teams from top U.S. and Asian business schools last month to win what was billed as the first international business case competition ever held in Beijing.

The competition challenged contestants to develop a strategy for increasing the U.S. market share of **Tsingtao Beer**, China's largest and most popular brand. The UW team won with its plan to target likely customer segments by redesigning labels, adding fortunes and rebranding one of the beers as "Tao."

The win and its \$5,000 prize are not just a major accolade for the four students, but a point of pride for the UW's Michael G. Foster School of Business, which is trying to rise in the rankings.

"We want our students to be known for being able to roll up their sleeves and solve complex, unstructured, real-world problems," said Jim Jiambalvo, the UW business dean.

Winning the award were UW master's of business administration students Ryan Cassidy, Josh Holt, Adam Martin and Carrie Pederson. They were advised by Ming Fan, associate professor of information systems.

"I think overall our team made a strong impression for the UW," said Pederson, who wowed the Beijing crowd of 400 when she addressed the crowd in fluent Mandarin Chinese.

Solving Tsingtao's challenge was no small task for the four students selected by the school's Global Business Center. Tsingtao Beer is China's largest beer company. Started in 1903, it accounts for about 50 percent of China's beer exports. However, the company has struggled to capture U.S. market share. Tsingtao supplies less than 1 percent of the U.S. lager imports.

The students' challenge also included going up against such top schools as the University of Chicago, Carnegie Mellon University, National University of Singapore and the host Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business.

"I don't think we were supposed to win, in that there were some of the top schools there," Pederson said.

With only the busy month of December to prepare, the UW team set about researching the company and how it could reach younger beer drinkers. The team found that Americans largely were not aware of the brand and could not pronounce it (it's ching-DOW), and that the company's marketing strategy was disconnected from younger consumers who desire simple, authentic and original concepts.

So the team recommended such strategies as renaming the company's draft beer "Tao," an approach that would take Tsingtao "from Chinatown to downtown." Another recommendation included putting

fortunes, similar to those in fortune cookies, on bottle labels.

The strategy, along with the team's simple presentation backed up with market data, was a hit. The UW defeated Ohio State University in the competition's final round.

The students are quick to credit their business school.

"We are all pretty grounded in realism. I think our classes teach structure and theory, but keep it pretty balanced with things you use in the marketplace," said Cassidy, who used to work at Woodinville-based Ste. Michelle Wine Estates. That experience helped him research the Tsingtao case.

The UW team does not know if Tsingtao or U.S.-based distributor **Crown Imports** -- both of which helped judge the competition -- will use any of its recommendations. Regardless, the competition allowed the UW's Foster School to showcase its students -- and MBA program -- to the world's most up-and-coming economy, said Fan, the UW team coach.

"They demonstrated," he said, "that our school really is a world-class school."

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