Local businesses get marketing support from WKU class

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A Western Kentucky University class is working to complete public relations projects free of cost for about 30 area businesses and organizations.

Twenty public relations majors, all but one seniors, are working on around 40 projects for clients — most small businesses, and some nonprofits. Most clients fall within one of multiple groups: startups of the WKU Innovation Campus, WKU campus companies, WKU-affiliated businesses, and restaurants of the Sasa Restaurant Group; others are the Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce, the Sky Arts Film Festival and the new vegetarian restaurant Vistro.

Normally, the class's students work in small teams to complete one big project for one client. This time,class instructor Steven Momorella said, he's trying to turn the classroom into a PR agency. While relatively early, those working with the students expressed enthusiasm.

" … We're going to have really done some impact across a lot of different businesses in Bowling Green," Momorella said. "Then, I hope to do the whole same thing again next semester with a whole group of new kids."

The projects span many timelines and skill sets for its numerous marketing campaigns: events, social media work, podcasting and so on. Momorella added that they need to be good — as the aim is to continue pursuing new projects through the future.

Penny Hughes, programs and events manager at the WKU Innovation Campus, said she connected with members of the campus, most of them startups, to help figure out their needs and whether certain marketing campaigns would fit best. One standout element, she said, will be a podcast featuring interviews with Innovation Campus tenants.

"Do they have a project they may not have time to do, (where) these students could use the experience making it come to life for them — whether it be a social media campaign, or whether it be a film festival?" she said.

Melinda Whitfield Gilbert, founder of the new vegetarian restaurant Vistro, said it's nice to be able to hand some work off to others.

“When you are a small business owner, you have a small budget, you have one employee and usually that’s you,” Whitfield-Gilbert said. “You’re the accountant, the PR person and the cook and everything.”

Several teams of students are also working with the Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce, where they’ll learn from the chamber as they pitch in to three important reports, according to Meredith Rozanski, the chief financial officer and executive vice president of leadership and education for the chamber.

For the educational piece, the students are getting acquainted with the chamber’s annual report, which recaps economic development, education and partnership activities; its legislative action agenda; and its action plan.

Meanwhile, they’re working with the chamber’s marketing director and coordinator, who’ll oversee students’ work to ensure they’re in line with the branding and standard of the chamber.

“They get an opportunity to kind of understand more about what’s going on in the community through our different updates, and then being able to share that information out through their networks as well,” Rozanski said. “And it’ll be a great way for us once we get the publications to then showcase to our 1,300 partners what a great job that they did to better align our business community with the students that are graduating from WKU …

“I think it’s a really great thing, but it’s also interesting for our team, because the current generation coming up from school is used to a very different level of — particularly social media and visual arts — than what we were all brought up in, and so their ideas are just amazing.”

Miranda Hardin, one of the class’s students, is working alongside others to market for Atlas RVM, which makes reverse vending machines that people use to process cans and bottles for recycling on the spot; WKU has three on the main campus and one at the Innovation Campus. Some of the ideas for marketing include a social media campaign and campus outreach through tabling and more traditional media.

It’s different from other assignments, she said, because many are theoretical.

“It feels like it really matters, so you put in more effort,” she said.