Life Is Good No Matter What

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The University of Akron

Leadership Experience Project

Life Is Good No Matter What

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Introduction

Leadership is a term often used to describe a skill that every employer requires, yet few new graduates understand. Books are written, seminars are planned, speeches are composed, yet, in all the time we have spent at The University of Akron, our biggest opportunity to experience leadership involved a project that incorporated every facet of this skill, not as defined on a page, but as developed through a collection of experiences, both in our successes and failures. Through self-awareness, personal adaptability, persistence, social consciousness, and team development, among many others, we were not taught how to define leadership, but learned how to utilize the tools and methods through which to become efficient, effective, and ethical leaders. Even today, at the culmination of our Leadership Experience Project, we still have much to learn when it comes to the development of our own leadership identities. What we have taken away from this great experience is the knowledge that when a team puts the best of their own skills together, the results shine above the ability of what any single one could do separately. It is this journey, from a goal composed one year ago, to the exciting outcome we have reached today, that is explored and explained in the paper below.

Our Leadership Experience Project (LEP) began with a task involved with helping a local cancer charity. Life Is Good No Matter What was formed in 2012 to help assist adults “escape from cancer.” Be this a few hours away at a nice dinner with family, a trip to the beach to escape the cold of an Ohio winter, or as one recipient put it, the opportunity to experience “the total fun and adventure it was to be spoiled and treated like VIPs.” LIGNMW strives to provide an “escape” for these people so that they may spend a moment to enjoy life beyond the struggles caused by their illness. The charity was founded in memory of Holly, a wife, mother, sister, and all around great person, who throughout treatment held the motto that “life is good, no matter
what.” Although Holly passed away in 2011, her memory and motto lives on through the cherished moments and experiences that the organization her brother founded in her honor, provides to those who seek to “celebrate life today like there is no tomorrow.” It is with this background that we received our task.

Currently, Life is Good No Matter What receives all of their funding through donations by people who support and believe in their cause. This method, although extremely important, faces many challenges. First, it requires that people are generous enough and able to donate their own personal funds to the cause. In 2013, over $335 billion was donated to charitable organizations (Charitynavigator.org, 2015). Of these donations, human services charities, of which Life is Good No Matter What is categorized, receive only a fraction at $41.51 billion (Charitynavigator.org, 2015). A significant figure considering the economic climate, but this is a value representing the donations that are given to thousands of charities across the country. LIGNMW must compete in a space that is not only crowded but requires significant effort to build out. With charities under greater scrutiny to reduce fundraising costs (Andreoni, J., & Payne, A., 2011), this becomes a large obstacle. In order to help them supplement this donation based income, members of the charity challenged us to develop an alternative revenue stream that did not solely rely on the kindness of people's hearts, but offered some additional utility that would serve as uncoupled cash flow to the charity. With the average escape costing well over $3,500, and the goal to provide over 20 escapes in 2015, a product or service would help Life Is Good No Matter What provide more escapes to those with cancer.

Before beginning the actual project, we met with Life Is Good No Matter What board member and our project mentor, Dr. John Jewell. He described how the charity sought not just another product or service, but one that was unique and representative of the organization’s
brand. Throughout the introduction, he coached us to “think differently” and provided an analogy to help frame the charity’s hopes for a product or service. He recommended that “We not try to run a candy drive, but invent a candy bar.” To this point, it was not to say that those items don’t work, but that we should utilize our own creativity as well as this unique opportunity to search for a solution that extends beyond the expectations of what many consumers see in products or services offered by charities, or for that matter, businesses and or companies. With this, we hoped to develop a product or service that would serve as not only a way for Life Is Good No Matter What to earn funds, but also as a portal for people to learn about their work.

**Initial Research and Ideas**

When we began our search for a product idea that was both profitable and aligned with Life Is Good No Matter What, we did some background research to get an idea of what other charities were doing to generate additional revenue for their operations. Charities tend to be funded in a number of ways, including gifts and donations, grants, loan financing, and equity capital (Herbert, 2015). As mentioned, total charitable giving in the U.S. reached $335 billion in 2013 and of that number 72% came from individuals (NPTrust.org, 2015). The rest of the percentage came from grants, bequests, and corporate philanthropy. While this is a sizable amount of money donated to charity, there are currently over 1.5 million charitable organizations in the United States (NPTrust.org, 2015). Each organization must compete for these donations in a landscape where some of the larger, more popular charities can receive millions of dollars each year and other smaller organizations will only receive a few hundred dollars (Barrett, 2014). As mentioned above, individual donations make up the largest amount of funding received by charities, however, the amount received can be inconsistent based on economic downturns (Reich, 2012). Life Is Good No Matter What realized this concept and sought to create a product
that would bring in regular income. For this reason some of our initial stages of research not only investigated other charities, but also investigated new trends and strong areas in which we could develop a product or service to bring in consistent revenue.

Charity Revenue Streams

One of our initial stages of research began with attempting to understand what is currently being done with sustainable revenue streams in the world of nonprofits. We wanted to evaluate what has been done before, versus what is unique. With this information, we could begin to take our ideas and analyze whether we were creating something innovative or not. Many nonprofit organizations take part in traditional forms of generating money, including fundraising events, selling merchandise (t-shirts, hats, cups, keychains, bumper stickers, etc.), or asking for donations. However, Life Is Good No Matter What wants to break away from this typical mold and create a source of revenue that is continuous and not entirely focused on people choosing to purchase something solely because it is for charity. Nonprofit organizations that did step away from the norm often did so with an event or service. These events and services included finding new ways to encourage charitable donations, unique sponsorship programs, games revolved around donating, or partnerships with other companies for a portion of the proceeds (Wilkinson, 2013). While there are a variety of unique ways to bring in money for an organization, much of these examples are based on a one-time event or rely on the kindness of people to donate. We did not want to create something that is inconsistent or requires a heavy reliance on factors that we cannot particularly control. For this reason, we sought to find charities focused on products.

The first organization that often comes to mind when you think “cancer charity” is Susan G. Komen and the fight against breast cancer. Susan G. Komen is known for the pink ribbon on all of its merchandise and their products are all specifically focused around the image of the pink
ribbon. Whether it is clothing, jewelry, bags, office supplies, or other accessories, the organization is focused on branding each item so it is known to be from Susan G. Komen (Shopkomen.com, 2015). While most charities seem to have merchandise that somehow brands their organization, we were searching for those that are creating a product not entirely focused on the charity itself.

One such charity in New York was doing exactly this, but only at a limited scale. Charity Water is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to bring clean and safe drinking water to people in developing countries. Charity Water does have typical merchandise like t-shirts and water bottles, but what sets them apart from others is the fact that they sell bikes (Charitywater.org, 2015). The bike is designed with the charity’s black and bright yellow colors, and has the small Charity Water logo. This bike donates a portion of the proceeds to the organization, but aside from this there is nothing that makes the charity the first and foremost aspect of the bike. It is a product first, and a charitable donation second. From this example, we sought to achieve a similar idea in creating a valuable consumer product first, with the added benefit of donating to charity.

**Product Trends**

We scouted for observable trends with potential staying power that we could successfully tap into with our yet-to-be-defined consumer product. One of our first thoughts was to look into bringing a smartphone app to the market. With the growing integration of smartphone technology into into our everyday lives (Gold, 2014), we thought there might be an opportunity to create an app that was differentiated, embodied LIGNMW, and would appeal to an unfilled market niche. Smartphone users are currently at 75% penetration in the United States and this number is expected to increase to 80-85% by December 2015 (Sterling, 2015). We had a few
initial conceptual ideas for a travel-themed application that would allow people to share their amazing experiences with one another. This app would tap into the “escape” message of the charity by focusing on connecting people to the spaces they visit. However, we eventually realized that the idea was not differentiated enough from popular social media outlets. After further research, we found that new apps have tremendous difficulty breaking into a marketplace dominated by a relatively small number of established players (Spence, 2014). We realized that entering the flooded smartphone application market would not be a strategically sound decision. Further, given our limited time and resources, a project of this scale would require substantial time and expertise to develop that we did not have the capability to accomplish. According to a study of 100 mobile designers, the average time it takes to develop a mobile application, not including conceptual development time, is 18 weeks (Rice, 2013). Factoring in time to find a developer and fully conceptualize the idea, we determined that that this option was outside our capabilities, and was not viable.

We also considered the growing trend towards health consciousness. 73% of adults reported saying that they are attempting to eat healthier than they were two years ago (Miles, 2015). Baby Boomers, who are expected to control more than half the dollars spent on groceries in 2015, are looking for food options rich with antioxidants, according to the CEO of the Lempert Report, a firm that specializes in forecasting supermarket trends (Gould, 2012). With widespread obesity and health problems associated with poor diet finally being recognized as the problem that they are (Caloriecontrol.org, 2015), we thought we could develop a food or lifestyle product that capitalized on this behavioral shift. This idea was kept top of mind as we continued our search, but was eventually discarded in favor of other options.
Idea Generation

As we proceeded with our brainstorming, we considered several other product categories. A wine or liquor product seemed a feasible option, especially since LIGNMW already sells a beer brewed for them by Aqueduct Brewery. We quickly decided, however, that it was too similar to the beer, and we wanted to offer a product in a separate industry.

We toyed with the idea of pursuing a product focused on the word ‘escape’, such as a line of luggage and travel products branded with LIGNMW. Upon looking doing some initial research we discovered that the luggage industry is $31.62 billion industry providing a large profit opportunity (Statista.com, 2012). However, the luggage industry is also highly focused on brand name and quality making it very difficult to succeed within the competitive landscape (De Angelis, 2012). While this idea encompassed some brand elements of the non-profit, we realized that it would simply be too difficult to capture a share of the market. We also felt that luggage did not identify with the brand on a personal level in that it only focused on the literal escape and did not capture the fun spirit of Life Is Good No Matter What.

At this point, we tried to think simpler. Maybe a chocolate product was enough of an ‘escape,’ as it offered a short break in the form of an indulgent snack. A few trends were observable, such as growing popularity of bite-sized chocolate bars (Lindell, 2014), but nothing really stood out that would represent Life Is Good No Matter What. In order to make this product unique, we discussed adding bugs in the chocolate. We knew this was a very edgy idea, but noted that people from many countries around the world include insects like crickets and ants in their diet (Weiner, 2011). We would be attempting to start a trend rather than follow one with this idea. We focused so much effort on being unlike anything else in the market, however we
quickly realized that we were concerning ourselves too much with this idea that we were missing the essence of the organization.

**Ice Cream**

After researching and brainstorming a wide variety of product ideas, we still felt that our ideas were not a perfect match to the Life Is Good No Matter What brand. It wasn’t until a discussion with someone about our efforts, where it was recommended that we investigate ice cream. It was in this moment where ice cream became our first viable option that seemed to align well with our perception of LIGNMW’s brand identity. We were searching for a product that focused on the concept of “escape.” At first, we were taking this too literally and only concerning ourselves with ideas revolving around travel. Other times, we tried to think of unique ideas, but ultimately they were not something that would emphasize the brand identity. We were so consumed in the research and initial efforts that we did not see something that clearly matched the brand. Ice cream seemed to fit with what we were searching for to match the idea of “escape.” It was not escape in the literal sense, but in the conceptual sense. Ice cream is something that often reminds people of good times, a dessert that allows people to enjoy it in that moment. 40% of consumers now eat dessert twice a week or more, up from 36% in a poll taken in 2011 (Berry, 2014). Going to get ice cream is something to do when you want to go and spend some quality time with your family or friends. Children drive the ice cream industry in a large part as 34% of total consumption is derived from households with children, compared to 20% of those households without children (Barette, 2015). Ice cream satisfies the need to get away from the struggles you’re facing and simply enjoy life. A study was actually conducted that found that people in high emotion states, particularly happy or sad, are 15% better able to taste sweet flavors and therefore tend to seek sweet food during these times (Innes, 2013). This product
solidified what Life Is Good No Matter What is doing in their mission to help people “celebrate life today like there’s no tomorrow” and create cherished memories out of something so simple.

**Industry Research**

While ice cream seemed to fit the brand identity well, we also had to determine if this was a viable option in producing a sustainable revenue stream. Secondary research was done to ensure this. We found that ice cream production is an 8.4 billion dollar industry, has experienced growth in the most recently passed five-year period, and is projected to continue growth at an annual rate of .3% between 2014 and 2019 (IBISWorld.com, 2015). Furthermore, industry research estimates a decline in the prices of commodities like milk and sugar, which are two primary ingredients in ice cream. According to IBISWorld’s industry report, milk prices “are expected to be much less volatile through 2019 than in the previous five-year period” with an annualized price decline of 3.4% during the same forecast period. Further, sugar is expected to drop in price at an annual rate of .4%. These price declines will lead to lower manufacturing costs and increased profitability moving into the future (IBISWorld.com, 2015). Lastly, as the economic recovery continues, and national unemployment declines, per capita disposable income is projected to increase, which will increase demand for premium ice cream (IBISWorld.com, 2015).

We next did some research to uncover what sort of trends could be found in the ice cream industry as it moves forward. Ice Cream can be broken into several categories including premium, frozen novelties, regular, and ‘low-fat and nonfat’ (IBISWorld.com, 2015). The health-consciousness trend is present in the ice cream industry, suggesting the low-fat category might be the best option. 15% of ice cream companies said they saw an increase for sugar-free
ice cream (PRNewswire.com, 2012). However, it turns out to be a relatively insignificant factor: “when it comes to ice cream, taste and flavor reign, as they recognize it’s a caloric indulgence but one that’s worth it” (Gagliardi, 2014). Gelato, which typically has less fat but similar taste to ice cream, and sorbet, which is a frozen treat with fruit flavoring, are substitutes that would be competitive forces in the ice cream industry (Gagliardi, 2014). 52% of ice cream companies saw an increased demand for frozen yogurt (PRNewswire.com, 2012). Ice Cream store franchises have been in decline in recent years according to a report by IBISWorld. This declining trend, which is observed only in franchise operations and not in the ice cream industry as a whole, is expected to continue into 2019, which will decrease internal competitive forces (IBISWorld.com, 2014).

**Initial Ice Cream Ideas**

Once we solidified the ice cream idea with secondary research of the industry, we were able to begin creating concepts, flavors, and names for the ice cream brand. We initially began to brainstorm flavors because we felt that this aspect of ice cream is often the thing that distinguishes one brand from another. We had to create something that was unique and not currently popular, but also something that would bring in revenue and have potential mass market appeal. Vanilla remains the most popular ice cream flavor with 92% of International Ice Cream Association (IICA) companies saying that is the biggest seller among their consumers (PRNewswire.com, 2012). Premium ice cream, which has a lower amount of aeration and higher fat content, was received as the most popular product with nearly 70% citing it as such (PRNewswire.com, 2012). Through this information and our own ideas, as well as receiving some recommendations from friends and family, we began to consider possible flavors like cinnamon roll, chocolate covered bananas and peanut butter, and ice cream with bacon pieces.
These flavors are different enough that they do not have a prominent space in the industry, but are also intriguing enough to attract customers. As we proceeded with more brainstorming, we also considered different concepts to match these flavor ideas. We continued to focus on the word “escape” and attempted to think of what reminded us of getting away; whether that be in the literal or conceptual sense. Themes of travel and adventure remained prominent as it is significant to the Life Is Good No Matter What mission. As our ideas continued with travel-themed names and adventurous concepts, we realized that our opinions could be skewed as we were already consumed with the project. There were only three of us contributing to the ideas of the product and that is not an accurate sample of the market we would be reaching. For these reasons, we decided to conduct some primary research of our own, to give us honest opinions on our initial ideas, as well as expand on other routes to take.

**Focus Group**

To gain first-hand insight into our initial ideas, as well as overall consumer behavior when making ice cream purchase decisions, we decided to host a focus group. Through our research of proper focus groups practices, it is important to conduct a focus group early when very little is known about the subject (Madrigal, 2011). This allowed us to understand how people perceive ice cream so that we can then address our initial assumptions and look into points of interest that arise from the session. The focus group was set to be an exploratory tool as we began to address how to bring ice cream to market.

On March 6th, eight participants from The University of Akron met with us at The Taylor Institute to spend an hour talking about all things ice cream. We spent $80 of our budget towards $10 Chipotle gift cards for each participant as incentive. In developing our focus group, a major aspect was to create an unbiased focus group that provided open-ended questions and did not
lead the participants to a particular answer (Hoets, 2009). We made it a point to create all of our questions around this practice so that we would receive unbiased answers. We began the focus group with a brief introduction and icebreaker exercise where we asked our participants what thoughts, feelings, or opinions came to mind when thinking about eating ice cream. Participants responded that they felt excited and happy, and that they “could never get enough of the tasty treat.” They noted that ice cream made them think of the summertime. Additionally, fond memories with friends and family were frequently mentioned. Some referenced a favorite ice cream parlor that they went to in their childhood. One noted that the thought of ice cream made him think of good times at his grandmother’s house, enjoying the delicious treat. Another shared that the neighborhood ice cream stand used to be a popular place to hang out with her friends.

We remarked at our team meeting later on that all of these ideas and emotions fall in line with the brand mantra of Life Is Good No Matter What (‘fun,’ ‘escape,’ and ‘inspire’). Each memory was related to a moment where the person could escape from their routine life and spend time with friends and family creating cherished memories. This provided vindication in our decision to choose ice cream as a product.

We then gave everyone a handout with about twenty potential ice cream names that we wanted to test, asked them all to write down what ice cream flavors they imagined would be associated with the names. Then, we told them to pick the top five that they hypothetically would most likely try. We also asked them their feelings about each flavor name they picked, and which ones on the list they would or would not want to try. The goal was to discover which of our collectively brainstormed names, if any, participants tended to gravitate towards, and also, if those names had strong enough connotations with the flavors they were intended to describe. Some names that came up as favorites were:
● ‘Beach Bonanza’ - “Reminds me of strawberry banana ice cream, which combines my two favorite flavors, and reminds me of summer.”
● ‘Bon-Bon Voyage’ - “It’s clever, classy, sounds yummy, and is fun to say!”
● ‘Caribbean Getaway’ - “Reminds me of peach and mango, and that sounds fantastic.”
● ‘Graham Canyon’ - “Seems similar to my favorite flavor I used to get with friends at Handel’s called ‘Graham Central’”
● ‘Summer Night Swirl’ - “Reminds me of a s’more-tasting ice cream”
● ‘Peanut Butter Bay’ - “Sounds familiar…simple…some of the [other] flavors were confusing, but I feel I know what I’m getting with this one.”

Occasionally a participant would surprise us with a name or flavor association that we did not originally anticipate. For example, Caribbean Getaway, imagined by our team as some sort of tropical fruit flavor, instead, reminded one participant of cotton candy; this type of potential ambiguity is worth noting.

After talking through the most popular names on the list, we asked which flavor names people did not like so much. The names that were considered the least favorite tended to be chosen because they were confusing or unclear. For example, Cinna-Safari, imagined to be a cinnamon-swirled ice cream, was unclear enough that several participants did not understand the meaning of the name. Once the name was said out loud, two participants remarked that they had read and interpreted it differently (“I thought it was referring to ‘Cincinnati’”), and that was the root of their confusion. Another example was the name ‘Hometown Bliss, which people agreed could mean too many different things to different people. In a lot of ways, insights like these were just as significant as the insights gained from the favorite names.
An especially profound insight on name ambiguity was given by one of the female participants: “I don’t feel like people would stop and read [the description for a confusing flavor name]. Most people just look at the picture and decide ‘I want to eat that.’” This statement was met with agreement from others around the table. Our interpretation of the ensuing discussion was that people often times judge ice cream heavily by the pictures and graphics on the ice cream container, but the name of the ice cream still should clearly connect to the flavor it is describing. It should be clear enough for the average person to immediately understand.

As the focus group progressed, key insights were found when exploring the factors that go into a purchase decision for ice cream. The primary factors were price, brand, flavor, flavor name, and container graphics and pictures. The majority of the group considered themselves not ‘brand loyal’- they had their favorite brands, but would easily switch to a different brand if factors such as price or flavor were compelling enough. On average, 62% of African Americans and 50% of Caucasians are more likely to report brand as a preference in ice cream (Tuttle, 2012). As mentioned earlier, participants unanimously agreed that the ice cream image on the container was very significant in the purchase decision. This ended up being the most important factor our participants considered when making ice cream purchase decisions, followed by price and brand. The name was largely considered less important, but participants noted that it should make sense and somehow relate to the ice cream it is labeling.

After a thorough discussion, we asked everyone to offer up some of his or her own ideas. Flavors that participants came up with varied greatly between simple (ie. Peanut Butter and Banana) and outside-the-box (ie. Peanut Butter and Jelly). Names were similarly varied. Some of the thoughts included:
• When discussing a ‘cinnamon roll’ ice cream: “I would want there to be swirls of frosting and chunks of cinnamon roll”

• When discussing a vanilla ice cream with chocolate covered banana bites and peanut butter: “The texture of the banana would be very important. If done right, it could be delicious.” “The banana bites would have to be soft enough to bite into.” “You could use the Peanut Butter Bay name from the list for it.”

• When discussing an ice cream with mixed in bacon bits: “Bacon should not be mixed with ice cream.” “I would try it if the ice cream had a maple flavor”

• “I consider what kind of ice cream would go well with cake”

• “Simple flavors with added-in pieces/chunks tend to be the best”

What was perhaps most surprising was the reaction our participants had at the end once we told them that the ice cream brand we were developing was for a cancer charity. Participants exclaimed that if they knew the proceeds were helping a cancer charity, it would factor into their ice cream purchase decision considerably. While this factor alone of course would not be enough to sell the ice cream, we still received some valuable insight. Our observation is that, based on our primary research, people tend to look at a brand favorably, if it is associated with a noble cause, but only after other factors such as price and flavor align with their tastes and preferences. A study found that 89% of consumers would be likely to switch brands for one affiliated with charity, but only if the quality and price held constant (Charitynavigator.org, 2015). From our abundance of information in the focus group we now had some direction in moving forward. In developing a product, the direction can be very broad. The focus group allowed us to understand a general opinion of how to address creating a valuable product. Although intuitive, additional secondary research indicated that focus group results are qualitative data, based on personal
experience and opinion rather than scientific fact (Madrigal, 2011). Further, they serve as great ways to learn behavioral and thought indicators (Madrigal, 2011). Therefore, we made the strategic decision to focus on creating a unique brand identity for the ice cream and also look further into the brand elements that were discussed with the group. The idea is to focus on the value of the product for the consumer and then leverage the organization to create a lasting impact that can lead to loyal customers and to spread brand awareness. Further “In the current era, marketers must offer differentiated products, the brand meaning of which resonates with consumers, to achieve brand loyalty” (Bennett, 2005). With this, our goal was to sell the ice cream first, educate about the charity second.

**Ice Cream Concepts**

The focus group helped us narrow some of our initial ideas and also helped generate new ideas for our next steps. Many people seemed to respond positively to the flavors dealing with cinnamon roll and chocolate covered bananas with peanut butter. Therefore, we chose these two flavors as we moved forward in creating an ice cream brand line. Once these flavors were chosen, we had to identify the names that would both match the flavor and be intriguing to the consumer. With the focus group, two of the top names were “Bon-Bon Voyage” and “Peanut Butter Bay.” We chose to expand ‘Peanut Butter Bay’ to ‘Peanut Butter Banana Bay’ in order to better describe the flavor and avoid the ambiguity that some of the focus group participants had mentioned. Overall, we felt that these two names matched the chosen flavors very well and they were two of the top names within the focus group. Because both names were inspired by travel, we felt there was potential to create a sub-brand. Through some brainstorming we chose the name “Sweet Re-Treats.” It would be a travel inspired umbrella brand for Life Is Good No Matter What that has room for expansion into the future. Brand names are often chosen through
a variety of ideas, such as using a founder’s name (Hewlett-Packard), describing what the brand does (Southwest Airlines), describing an image that relates (Sprint), taking a word out of context (Apple), or simply creating a new word (Google) (Marketingmo.com, 2015). We chose to focus on describing what the brand does and describing an image that relates in order to bring brand awareness to Life Is Good No Matter What. Sweet Re-Treats emphasizes how ice cream is, in itself, a treat and escape, but it is also a play on words to highlight the adventure and travel aspect of going on a retreat. Both Bon-Bon Voyage and Peanut Butter Banana Bay fit under this line, and these names were also well-received within the focus group. This was our initial idea and we felt strongly that this would be a good match for the organization.

We also had to analyze both the positives and negatives so we did not become completely consumed in our idea, thereby ignoring other potential routes. Sweet Re-Treats was focused on “escape” in the literal sense and focused on traveling. This perception creates a direct connection to what the organization does when sending recipients on escapes. Since Sweet Re-Treats is considered a sub-brand, it is easily expandable to more travel-themed flavors, providing an easy outlet for more sales if it does well. Sub-brands are most often used when the parent brand is unable to reach a market by itself (Brough, 2014). The sub-brand would allow Life Is Good No Matter What to extend their reach past only being a nonprofit organization. Brand line extensions would also be valuable in the future as they do not compete with each other. Rather, line extensions each reach a different niche market by appealing to different consumer needs (Boundless.org, 2014).

Upon further consideration, we began to discuss something not solely revolved around travel, but yet still capturing the essence of “escape.” Life Is Good No Matter What wants to focus on fun and celebrating good times, so we began to consider the idea of an ice cream
centered around a party. We wanted to take common food that you would find at a party and put it in one flavor. With this, we created an ice cream that would include M&M’s, cheesecake bites, cookie dough, Oreo pieces, chocolate covered potato chips, and marshmallow; pretty much everything you would need to party. This was something different with a variety of ingredients that are not often found together in one carton. This in itself was unique because most ice cream follows the rule of 10% of the volume of ice cream consisting of particulates (candy, fruit pieces, nuts, etc.) and 15% for syrups (Tharp, 2015). We decided to call it “Party ‘til the Last Scoop” as a play on words to emphasize a fun time and a way to celebrate life at every moment.

Due to this second concept, we began to weigh the positives and negatives of this line to compare to our first concept and decide on our next steps. This concept approached “escape” in the conceptual sense, drawing a broader connection to the experiences that Life Is Good No Matter What offers to its recipient. The concept also focused on more of a unique take on a flavor by including a large variety of ingredients that may make people stop and question the ice cream. The organization seeks to be different and unique and this ice cream would capture that edgier essence. Unsure as to which direction we should go, we decided that the best route would be to consult the Life Is Good No Matter What’s Board of Directors and get their opinion as to how well the concepts fit within their perception of the brand.

Board Meeting

To confirm that our ideas did indeed align with the spirit of Life Is Good No Matter What, we attended the non-profit organization’s monthly board meeting on Wednesday, April 15th. This was an excellent opportunity to get firsthand feedback on our progress from Founder Troy Haslinger, our project mentor and LIGNMW board member Dr. John Jewell, as well as the rest of the Board. We presented our two ice cream brand options, and explained how each
interpreted the idea of ‘escape’ in slightly different ways. We were pleased to find that the Board’s response was overwhelmingly positive. Members especially liked the ‘Sweet Re-Treats’ brand concept, and felt that it encompassed the fundamental ideas that Life Is Good No Matter What stands for: ‘fun,’ ‘escape,’ and ‘inspire.’ Some felt that our interpretation of an edgy option (‘Party ‘til the Last Scoop’) could be expanded upon and taken further, potentially into a whisky flavor. Overall, the reaction invigorated us and inspired us to move forward.

With their encouragement, we felt confident that “Sweet Re-Treats” encompassed the key elements of the charity and would serve as a firm base for our project. The next steps were to begin to construct the brand and make some strategic decisions on how to take our idea to market.

**Graphic Design**

In moving forward with our concept, we felt it was important to have a visual representation of how we imagined the packaging to look. The design will ultimately be a large part of what sells the product when mixed in with other competition on the shelves. In a typical supermarket a shopper passes about 600 items per minute so a product must be able to capture the consumer’s attention (Boundless.org, 2014). With this in mind, we chose to seek out a graphic designer to help us create a mockup of what a possible design could look like for one of our flavors. We felt that Bon-Bon Voyage was the most unique idea we had and therefore, we chose this flavor as our sample graphic. After choosing the concept, we decided to move forward with a graphic designer who was already contracted with the university. We spent $623.25 on the graphic designer to have an image created within about two weeks time. We gave him a synopsis of the organization, the brand identity, and our overall concepts for ice cream. Apart from this we did not give a specific direction as to what we wanted the image to look like, simply because
we wanted to see what he was able to come up with through his initial perceptions of the brand, organization, and product. However, upon his final creation we were not highly impressed with the image. We believed that it was too simple and would not stand out on a shelf enough for a consumer to purchase it over the competition. Professional quality will cost higher prices, which can range anywhere from $80-$200 an hour according to a recent article citing industry experts Sophia Chang, Lenny Terenzi, and Mike Jones (Sakai, 2014). To have this level of professional quality we would need to have devoted more of our budget to a graphic designer. While we did not have time to seek out further graphic design help, we believe that someone with a closer connection to the organization may be able to create a piece that truly highlights the brand and identity of Life Is Good No Matter What.

**Potential Suppliers**

In order to investigate how we would bring our product to market, we contacted six different suppliers around northern Ohio. Our goal was to identify the process required for making our concept a reality. One, Toft’s Ice Cream located in Sandusky, Ohio, provided us with great feedback. First, we would have to choose the composition of our flavors. Chuck, our contact there, made it clear that we would have to have all the details solidified before any samples could be created. Once complete, we would need to invest anywhere from $3,500 to $5,000 to get artwork for the packaging. After that, we would have to purchase at least 10,000 lids and containers to hold the product, a large input cost. Beyond just the packaging, batches would be made in 1,200 to 1,600 gallon runs to accommodate for setup costs and economies of scale. Once made, would then have to find our own method of delivery and distribution for our private label ice cream as Tofts did not have established channels in the area. With this
knowledge, we realized that even a “small” supplier would require big investment of time, money and resources.

Seeing as how Toft’s was too large scale for the project, we reached out to a local restaurant and ice cream shop, Mary Coyle. They are a small outfit centered in Akron that is known for good cuisine and homemade ice-cream. We hoped that they would be able to provide a smaller scale perspective that would allow us the flexibility to trial samples and to produce limited batches for concept testing. Although interested in the idea, Mary Coyle’s was just too small of an operation to meet the needs of our product. From this point, we transitioned from selecting a supplier to documenting our progress.

Next Steps

To provide direction on how to develop the alternative revenue stream concept into an actual product, we created a business plan with recommendations for implementation by Life Is Good No Matter What. In this, we detail how to bring ice cream to market, as well as estimations of how to be profitable in the years to come. This plan will highlight the final development of the ice cream, operations and management, marketing, budget factors, launch date, and future outcomes.

Distributor

If we were moving forward with the implementation we would first look into finalizing a supplier and or distributor. The chosen supplier must be able to create the flavors described. This may sound obvious, but certain ice cream suppliers only deal with the ice cream base alone, while other suppliers are able to include pieces, chunks, or swirls of flavoring. Since both of the ice cream flavors chosen for Sweet Re-Treats require intricate ingredients, it is important to find someone capable of developing these flavors. Pav’s Creamery, an ice cream store located in
Akron, is interested in producing “Sweet Re-Treats” and they also have a multitude of unique ice creams with chunks and pieces throughout their flavors. This would fit along the same lines as the type of ice cream we seek to create for Life Is Good No Matter What.

**Target Market**

We believe that the ideal market is currently selling through local premium ice cream shops. Grocery stores are a large market with high competition (IBISWorld.com, 2015). Many well-known brands are found in this segment, but it is also price sensitive due to the ease to switch from different brands and still receive similar flavors (IBISWorld.com, 2015). Therefore, the premium segment is the ideal market with which to sell Sweet Re-Treats. Local ice cream shops in the Akron and surrounding areas provide the core target market that are willing to pay a higher price for better quality ice cream. An ice cream location in the Akron area allows those who currently know about Life Is Good No Matter What to be the first target market. Those who know about the organization are more likely to support the product and this support could lead to others in the Akron area. The probability of selling to a prospect is about 5-20%, while the probability for existing customers is 60-70% (Second-to-none.com, 2015). Those who have already donated to LIGNMW or have been a part of the organization somehow are more likely to purchase the ice cream. Once the brand begins to spread, future locations can be decided upon.

**Packaging**

It is important to look into packaging design as well. Even though we did initial steps with a graphic designer, it is not at the quality to put to market. Therefore, we suggest going to a different graphic designer to receive a more professional and personalized design. The fundamental criteria for effective packaging are to be seen on a shelf, to engage shoppers, to communicate key messages or points of difference, and to ultimately close the sale (Asher, 2015)
Packaging is highly important as businesses have reported a 30% increase in consumer interest when those businesses show a strong attention to packaging (Jarski, 2014). It is important to have the name “Sweet Re-Treats” be one of the main focuses in order to highlight the brand line. On the packaging should also be references to Life Is Good No Matter What, as this is the parent brand, and when creating a sub-brand both names should be included on the packaging (VanAuken, 2012). The logo and name should be included on the front of the packaging as an image for people to correlate the ice cream with charity. 52% of people around the world make purchase decisions partially due to packaging that shows a brand making a positive social or environmental impact (Conran, 2014). We want the ice cream to be set apart from other brands as something different, and the organization is one of the main things that makes this product different. However, it should not be the biggest part of the packaging as it is important to make it about the ice cream first and the organization second. On the back of the packaging is where information about LIGNMW and possible recipient escapes could be explained to establish that connection with the organization and mission. It is still important to include information to relate to the charity while focusing on a valuable product.

**Price**

Once the ice cream is created and other product factors are decided upon, the price of the ice cream will be the next aspect in the product mix. It is important to note that 42% of North Americans reported that they would pay extra for products and services from a company committed to positive and social impact (Causemarketingforum.com, 2015). While our main focus is not on the charity, it is an area that can be leveraged in charging a higher price for the product. Overall, the average profit margin within the ice cream industry was about 4.7% in 2014 (IBISWorld.com, 2015). Depending on the price of the ice cream and the volatility of the input
products, this number will fluctuate. Input costs (milk, sugar) have been volatile in the past 5 years and some producers have increased prices to absorb the cost (IBISWorld.com, 2015). However, in the next five years these input costs are predicted to begin to decrease, which will be seen in greater revenues for ice cream producers (IBISWorld.com, 2015).

Marketing

Marketing within the ice cream industry was estimated to account for 1.8% of the revenue for ice cream in 2014 (IBISWorld.com, 2015). Marketing helps to enhance company prestige, increase awareness about a product/service, helps stay competitive in the market, and ultimately helps to increase sales (Sims, 2013) We recommend that marketing remains a constant piece in the pre-launch and continuation of the ice cream line for Life Is Good No Matter What. The marketing plan would consist of using the website, social media, email, and paper mail. The ice cream should be publicized on the website on the main page in order to create buzz about when it is coming out and how to get it for the people who go to the website organically. The organization should also leverage their social media platforms of Facebook and Twitter to increase the following and discussion about the ice cream. 64% of Americans are more likely to support issues offline after first “liking” or “following” an organization online, and this number rises to 80% with Millennials (Causermarketingforum.com, 2015). Social Media is crucial in spreading awareness and creating a strong following. Studies have also shown that social media has a 100% higher lead-to-close rate than outbound marketing (DeMers, 2014). Posting on a regular basis during pre-launch and after the launch is crucial to developing ice cream into a successful product at a lower cost than other marketing efforts. 84% of marketers found as little as six hours of effort per week was enough to generate increased traffic (DeMers, 2014). A specific launch date should be set for the ice cream and with that there should be several posts on
each platform emphasizing the names, flavors, contribution to the organization, and pictures of the ice cream. Photo posts tend to get 39% more interaction on Facebook (Cooper, 2013), meaning it is specifically important to post images throughout the pre-launch. This will also spark people’s attention and a constant reminder of when the ice cream will be available in the shops. Emails and newsletters should be sent to past donors and participants in Life Is Good No Matter What events. 77% of people in the U.S. prefer email to receive promotional content which provides a great outlet to promote ice cream at a low cost (McGee, 2012). Direct mail should also be used as 40% of consumers say they have tried a new business after receiving direct mail, and 70% have renewed relationships with businesses that had previously ceased using. (CMOcouncil.org, 2012). Response rates for direct mail are also the highest in comparison with email, Internet display ads, and paid search (Yoon, 2013). This provides a strong platform to reach the community and capture a new market.

**Launch Date**

We recommend the launch date for the ice cream to be at the Life Is Good No Matter What Oktoberfest celebration. It may be difficult to set the timeline for fall since we do not know the exact time measurements for how fast ice cream can be created along with all of the other production elements. Given the busy summer time season, several of the suppliers noted that the earliest a product could be investigated would be mid to late fall. However, the Oktoberfest celebration, a large party put on by LIGNMW in Akron this fall, would be an ideal venue to debut the ice cream. At this event, it is important to announce the ice cream several times and give more information on how to find it apart from the event. The Rule of Seven states that a marketing message needs to be seen or heard at least seven times before they take action and buy
the product (Stenberg, 2008). Life Is Good No Matter What should also provide the ice cream at other events to continually spread the awareness and allow more people to try it.

Profit

We currently have $5,296.75 to put towards the implementation of the ice cream. This money will be split between distributor/supplier costs, packaging, graphic design, and marketing materials. Since LIGNMW does not have to create the product themselves, the start-up costs will not be as significant as creating their own. However, exact costs cannot be directly determined without further discussion from the distributor. Although an exact cost and profit cannot be determined, we believe that Life Is Good No Matter What should pursue a 3-5% profit margin. The average margin was about 4.7% last year and overall profitability in the ice cream industry is expected to increase (IBISWorld.com, 2015). With this brand line being a premium ice cream, along with the initial start-up costs, the profitability will be a little skewed from the average. If the organization seeks a 3-5% margin within the first year, the organization will have successfully created a sustainable revenue stream that will continue to spread brand awareness over time and create a strong brand identity for Life Is Good No Matter What.

Learning Outcomes

At the beginning of this Leadership Experience Project, we each entered with our own goals and ambitions. We sought to take an abstract idea and apply it to a multifaceted problem which would lead us to a well executed result. What we hadn’t planned for was the amount of personal development that we would encounter along the way. A key component that was an amazing opportunity, yet, complex challenge was the freedom to explore any idea that we saw appropriate. Although we had great guidance from our mentors, it took us all several months to develop our fit which in turn, left us wasting a large amount of time. Today, we have several key
takeaways for which we all feel will lead to better results not only in our careers, but our lives ahead.

**Brand Identity**

One of the main learning outcomes that we did not expect is the importance of brand identity. We were challenged for the entire first half of our project in identifying what the Life Is Good No Matter What brand is all about. The organization is relatively new as they were created in 2012. Their identity has ebbed and flowed with the development of their mission and organization direction. Without a clear understanding of who they are, they were struggling to identify which way to take the organization. They were trying to take part in too many different things that spread their brand away from a central idea. People can often only maintain one perception about a brand and LIGNMW was trying to capture too many ideas. As LIGNMW began to narrow this perception, we were there with them in attempting to understand their identity. The questions we asked ultimately helped both us and them clarify the idea of the brand. Once we began to realize that the brand seeks to identify with the word “escape” in the conceptual sense, not necessarily the literal sense, the fit of a product or service became clear. Since didn’t understand what the culture and perception of the brand was, we lacked the ability to develop a revenue generator that was not out of place with the mission and purpose of the charity. This was setback, but ultimately it reinforced the importance of brand in the way it relates to your actions within an organization. Through this project we quickly realized that by not having an exact brand identity, we couldn’t measure any of our ideas next to it nor move forward in implementation.
Time Management/Decision Making

Another thing that limited progress was our struggles with time management and decision making. We were given more than two semesters to complete this project, and because of this we felt comfortable spending far too much time in the idea generation stage. People often spread out the amount of work they have in the amount of time they have. So eventually when we were down to one semester and only had a few months left, we attempted to complete as much as we could in that period. While we got a lot done in spring semester, if we would have evenly distributed the work throughout the semesters, then we could have done even more. A problem we faced in terms of time management was creating due dates and then sticking to those due dates within the time allotted. While we met regularly, we were rarely able to make decisions for the next step or keep to those decisions. We would create a general goal of things to have done for the next time we met, but often we were very lenient in whether it got done to the fullest. This was poor planning on our part as we did not create firm plans even though we met often. We had a broad plan, with no specific strategic actions making it very difficult to move forward towards completion. This is something that we will all take with us in the future as it is important to set smaller objectives to achieve along the way towards the main goal.

Teamwork

A major component of the leadership experience project was working as a team. This was a huge learning point as three people with very different personalities are bound to face problems and setbacks when working together for close to a year. Towards the beginning of the project we were still getting to know each other and we didn’t want to step on anyone’s toes. We often calmly discussed all decisions and wouldn’t move forward unless we were all in agreement.
Discussing future steps is a good quality, but it hinders progress forward when decisions need to be made even if everyone is not in agreement. Often, our downfall was that we decided to split work up evenly between the three of us, but we never took the time to realize each person’s strengths. We each have different strengths and weaknesses so it is important to leverage those strengths when possible. Since we split up the work evenly, not everyone was as successful at certain parts compared to the others in the group. Once we figured out where each person worked best, it was much simpler to delegate research, design aspects, writing, and other sections to the person with the strongest capabilities. Even once we identified these qualities, there were still bound to be differences in personality traits, how each person works, and overall opinion of where to go in the future. However, due to the time crunch, we were able to put aside a lot of these differences and think about the broader goal of what would be best for Life Is Good No Matter What.

**Real-World Experience**

One of our greatest challenges and best things we gained from this project was the real-world experience. Through working with an actual client, we were able to experience many things that are not always realized from in-school projects. First of all, we worked very closely with the client in scheduling meetings to discuss the brand, the direction we were going, and their opinions on our progress. This was unique because we could constantly have feedback, where we often don’t get to talk with the client in school projects. Understanding the client and the organization is huge, especially when it comes to creating a product that revolves around the brand. Being able to have a direct connection in truly understanding the brand identity was a very valuable as it emphasized the importance of determining what would be best for the client versus solely relying on what we thought was best. It also pushed us to think outside of what was
comfortable. For this project we had a lot of freedom to go any direction in creating an alternative revenue stream, in comparison with many other school projects where we have guidelines and limitations. It took us some time to get past that realization, but the client continued to push us past our boundaries until we found something that would fit their needs.

Real-world experience also included a number of unplanned setbacks. Often times in school, big problems don’t arise because the projects are created in order to be completed within certain parameters. However, creating a sustainable revenue stream has not been something that we have done nor is there a rulebook to how things are supposed to unfold. Due to this, we learned how to deal with roadblocks as they came and find new ways to work around them. Some of what we learned included the need to do in-depth research before making any other decisions. Research is a huge aspect in decision-making and we did not initially understand the length of time this could take before actual implementation began. This is important for us to realize when we move into the future and have to do critical research to prepare to make decisions.

We gained much of our real-world experience when we began to work with other businesses to implement our product concept. We had to contact distributors and suppliers to receive estimates on how to create the ice cream. However, we learned a lot in how to speak with the distributors as representatives of an organization instead of students. It was important to be professional, know what you want, communicate that clearly, and understand the needs of the company as well. Each company we spoke to had different ideas about how this would look and it was important to match our needs with their needs in this partnership. The work to find such a business was much more in depth than we expected, but it was invaluable to work that closely in this crucial step. We also worked with a graphic designer. We assumed most graphic designers
would have similar capabilities in creating a package design. So after giving some understanding of what we wanted, the graphic designer still did not provide the level of quality we felt we needed. Through this, we decided to not work with him anymore and find someone else. This was a huge learning point since we’ve rarely had to deal with professional work that we felt to be unsatisfactory. We had to decide if he was worth the money or to simply go a different route for the best outcome for Life Is Good No Matter What. While getting rid of the graphic designer created a small setback it was good to realize that not everyone you work with is going to be at the level that you expect them to be. However, it is okay to pursue other outlets and not always choose the first option.

A piece of real-world experience that we did not necessarily realize was all of the different parts and decisions that need to be made in order to put a product to market. Once we completed the idea generation and research we faced many implementation aspects. These required a lot of effort as this was determining how our product would be sold, where, when, and the cost factors that go into it. Ultimately, this would be how Life Is Good No Matter What makes a profit, the main goal in this entire project. While we did not get to spend a large amount of time towards this section as our project timeframe was coming to a close, the initial research stages on how to achieve these factors were very important and will lead LIGNMW in the most appropriate direction. Creating a business plan for the future scratched the surface of this and was invaluable to understanding how we would handle creating a product if this was our company. We may not have gone to market with the product, but the concept generation created a strong base for real-world experience and how we can work through these situations in our future.
For every limitation we faced, it simply created a new learning outcome. Through our failures we learned to push through and find a different way to do things and complete the project. It was not always easy, but if we faced success with every decision then we would not have learned the amount that we did. We can now be confident that when we face setbacks and failures in our future careers, that we have a better grasp of how to work through them and come out even stronger.

Emily’s Reflection

When I look back at the progress made towards completing our goals set up for the Leadership Experience Project and specifically Life Is Good No Matter What, I am overall very proud with what we accomplished. Through success and failure, I have learned valuable knowledge that is simply incomparable to any other project.

I initially joined this project in the summer of 2014 as the second person behind Daniel Wyrock. I found the proposal of creating an alternative revenue stream for a nonprofit organization to be unique and captivating. I knew it could be a challenge, but it intrigued me to the point where I wanted to be a part of it. Daniel and I began meetings immediately and met with John Jewell to better understand the charity. While we began our initial steps early, the realization that we had two whole semesters to work on the project quickly set in and we became complacent to let gaps in between meetings become longer, and never really set due dates for particular steps. I definitely learned a lot through this period simply because I’ve realized I work better under pressure, but this is not the type of project that allows for large gaps in time with no progress and that was one of my main struggles. I kept pushing the work back assuming I would simply get it done when I was under a time crunch, but there were so many aspects to this project that it simply became impossible to follow through as the due date got closer and closer.
When fall semester began Daniel and I began to understand that steps needed to be made. The difficulty now came with making time apart from our scheduled classes. I found it challenging to work on my off time for a class that was giving me a grade in the current semester. I put priority on my main courses, and the LEP took a backseat to my other school work. Within fall semester, Brian also joined the group. With a new dynamic in the group, Kevin Smith began reaching out to us more often to provide us some sort of direction towards our goal. Having that guidance and direction when we began to slow down in our motivation was crucial to our progress. However, we spent the entire fall semester stuck in one place simply by trying to identify a product that would create revenue and match the brand. The group meetings between the three of us also struggled in productivity as our methods and the way we worked was very different. We faced differences in opinions with each other and because of these differing ideas we had trouble deciding on things for the future, leaving us in a stagnant position.

By spring semester we had finally decided on a product through asking others their opinion on the idea. Meetings were now scheduled about once a week and we planned our next steps at each one. However, the group dynamic played a critical part in this and each meeting was faced with minor discrepancies about which way to take things. Actions were discussed, but no strong strides forward were achieved. Therefore, we created the revised goal to have all of the details about the product and a business plan on how to implement it for the future as we leave this with Life Is Good No Matter What.

This project has taught me a multitude of things revolving teamwork, timeliness, and decision making. While our team did not always connect on opinions and ideas, I learned how to leverage strengths of each team member in order to move forward. Brian was good at research and finding the information we needed, Daniel was good at seeing the broad picture of things
and keeping us on track, and I am very detail oriented allowing me to piece each part together. We learned these things toward the end, but we could have used them to our advantage at the beginning. Instead, we attempted to work together through each step causing us to find differences in the way we would execute things and stumbled through that. Each person has specific strengths and weaknesses and it is important to identify those in beginning stages so we would have known how to split up the work. We finally realized these things towards the end, when we started to make strong decisions and take the areas we were each comfortable with. If I could do this over again I would take the time to get to know each person individually and identify how each person works in these situations.

In regards to timeliness, I unfortunately learned that I am a procrastinator and need to set individual and team deadlines far in advance. By not having deadlines we were able to approximate due dates and have things accomplished as we saw fit. However, that left too much room for error and never left us accountable for what we needed done as time went on. For such a large project I now know that I should have set individual due dates that I vowed to keep in order to hold myself accountable to my procrastination tendencies. It also would have helped us remain on track as a team so we were all on the same page over time.

Decision making was also a huge problem for me and within the group. I attempt to avoid conflict so whenever things became a problem we would all be very accommodating to each other’s opinions. However, this never led to a decision and rather, we would try to work through it until we could all decide on something together. This method is fine as every member should have a say and a group should work together, but under a time crunch we did not have the ability to discuss each aspect of the project before moving forward. We needed to make decisions in the
moment and work through those decisions as a team. I need to learn to be able to confidently make a decision and be willing to deal with the consequences versus trying to avoid conflict. Towards the end of the project we finally understood our strengths and weaknesses as a team and how to work with them. We began to complete things in a timely manner as the pressure was on and we had to create a quality product. And we ended up making decisions and moving forward instead of questioning every little aspect. While there were definite struggles through most of the project, we finally saw where our mistakes were and sought to correct them before finishing the project. I have learned so many valuable qualities about myself and others that I definitely plan to use when faced with similar situations down the road. It is unfortunate we struggled so much during the beginning stages, but I would argue that those struggles ultimately helped us turn things around towards the end and will help each of us in a different way for the future. In hindsight, there are things that I wish we could have seen coming or have changed in the moment, but those failures provided an incomparable learning experience. I am very proud of what I know now and the completion of our Leadership Experience Project.

Brian’s Reflection

Working to develop an alternative revenue stream for Life Is Good No Matter What has been one of the most enlightening experiences of my college career at The University of Akron. Facing the struggles associated with building a brand and bringing it to market has given me a much deeper respect for the process than I originally had. Even though we did not meet our goal of bringing a product to market, I feel we did craft an excellent product concept that is aligned with Life Is Good No Matter What and has potential to be successful in the market. We outlined actionable next steps and took some initiative in getting them started by doing things such as reaching out to potential suppliers. Had we not experienced the struggles and delays from
coming up with a product idea early on in our time working together, I feel that we likely would have been able to complete our task more fully. Overall, however, I am proud of the progress we made in spite of our struggles, and am grateful for the experience.

I joined Daniel and Emily on this project at the beginning of fall semester this past year to fulfill my honors project. This is a requirement for the degrees I am working towards achieving: Integrated Marketing Communications and Marketing Management. After several meetings with Kevin Smith, head of the Leadership Institute at The University of Akron, where he provided guidance and helped me understand potential project options I could join, I did some research on Life Is Good No Matter What. The non-profit organization’s goal of developing an alternative revenue stream to help fund its ‘escapes’ really seemed like something that was worth working towards. I reached out to Emily and Daniel, and shortly afterwards we were having weekly team meetings and planning our LEP roadmap.

It was an incredible struggle deciding on a product to choose for LIGNMW. We wanted to pick a product that was both profitable and captured the core essence of the brand, but occasionally we were unclear exactly how LIGNMW wanted to position themselves. Being a fairly new organization meant that they still were working on their own brand identity, while we were simultaneously trying to move forward in our task. For example, some of the board members wanted LIGNMW to be seen as ‘edgy.’ We spent time brainstorming ideas that captured this edginess, but we were ultimately advised to steer clear of this route. Looking back, it was a valuable learning lesson. In the marketing and advertising field, working through ambiguity with clients is an important skill to have, and I feel confident that through this experience, I am better equipped at dealing with it moving forward.
Time management was something we certainly had trouble with early on. With two semesters worth of time to complete our project, we were lenient with ourselves and spent too much time on product conceptualization. We collectively set our sights very high; we were motivated and wanted to find the absolute perfect product for Life Is Good No Matter What. As such, we mulled and mulled over our brainstorms, and didn’t finally choose ice cream until very early spring semester. We all learned a valuable lesson in time management through this experience. Setting concrete objectives, and a robust timeline for completing them, would have moved our project along. However, we still were able to make some useful progress, and I am proud of what we accomplished.

Once we had decided on ice cream, progress was made much more quickly. Finally, we started setting and achieving goals to moving forward. Hosting our focus group was very beneficial. We were able to dig deeper into the factors that people consider when purchasing ice cream, and we observed some meaningful insight from this. Attending the board meeting with John, Kevin, Troy and the others gave us a clearer understanding of how Life Is Good No Matter What viewed themselves, which allowed us to shape our product accordingly. When we came up with ‘Sweet Re-Treats’ we explored it from every different angle. Some of the best advice Kevin gave us was to ‘try to hate your idea.’ It is easy to fall in love with your own ideas and develop a narrow-minded bias, but Kevin cautioned us so that we thoroughly thought through our ideas until we were sure they were worth moving forward with.

Working with Emily and Daniel throughout this process has been beneficial to me personally. Daniel’s ability to look past the minutiae and focus on the larger picture helped keep us set on our goals. Emily’s attention to detail helped us explore every aspect of an idea to determine the unbiased positives and negatives of each one. While at the beginning, when we
still didn’t know each other well, we had to work on our communication; I believe that through this experience we learned how to work well with one another. This can be seen in the speed of our progress throughout. At the beginning we were slow moving, but in the final months we were actually quite quick at getting things done. I am glad to have worked with this team and Life Is Good No Matter What for my LEP project.

    Overall, I believe that this project has given me a unique, real-world experience that I would not have been able to get in the classroom. I am confident that years down the road, I will look back at this Leadership Experience Project as a highlight of my college career.

**Daniel’s Reflection**

    In similar fashion to Emily and Brian, this Leadership Experience Project has been one of the highlights of my education at the University of Akron. I first heard about the opportunity to work with Life Is Good No Matter What in the beginning the 2014 spring semester. Although a student studying finance and economics, I have always had a side interest in entrepreneurship. This project, with its goal of creating an alternative revenue stream, seemed to fit within my own personal goals and strengths. Towards the end of that semester, I attended a presentation by LIGNMW founder Troy Haslinger and board member Dr. John Jewell. After listening to their passionate delivery on “How to Build a Non-Profit Like an Entrepreneur,” I was hooked. They seemed to hold great values and provide an amazing benefit to people with cancer. I knew that with a project like this, I would not only get the chance to learn, but would have the opportunity to help people along the way.

    Soon after making my decision to work with LIGNMW, Emily joined the project and we were off to planning our strategy to creating an alternative revenue stream for the charity. We had everything we needed for success: passion about the idea, money to fund it, time to
implement it, mentorship for guidance and freedom to explore any concept we desired. Although extremely valuable, these opportunities gave us a false sense of security for which we became too comfortable. The summer came and went with few deliverables met. One aspect that continually nagged us was our freedom to do whatever we saw fit. Although exciting in theory, when most of your education (from primary to post-secondary) is spent with clear defined outcomes, roles, expectations and guidelines, a project like this can become a challenge with a lack of full focus and motivation. Although we had all the tools for success, it took us a little too long to come to the realization that this project was not going to just materialize. It had to be nurtured and built through hard work, perseverance, meticulous planning and dedication. All things that we knew how to do, just never to this scale.

In the fall, Brian joined our team and we went from having a lean set up to a potentially more skillful group. As mentioned by both Emily and Brian above, a team built of 3 individuals provides both benefits and challenges. When done correctly, a successful team understands the strengths and weaknesses of each team member. They know when and how to leverage each person’s skills to compliment those in which the other members are not as proficient. Further, a good team objectively approaches sensitive topics and comes to resolutions quickly and fairly. Although our team eventually reached this level, earlier on, it was struggle to make progress. We investigated each little detail and would not move forward until all agreed. Tasks were split evenly without regard for strengths. This, along with our ability to pursue any idea, lead to delay after delay to the point where we had less than 3 months until the project completion with no solidified product or service idea. Although extremely stressful, these challenges led to some of the best learning outcomes of the project.
When we finally reached an idea this spring, our team quickly picked up on the best way to operate together. We made deadlines for complicated tasks that we completed in a timely manner. We divided work based on ability, and held each person accountable for their deadlines and quality. We stayed high-level and took a more holistic approach that lead to completion of project wide initiatives, not individual tasks. Through it all, we developed a sound concept that warrants the excitement and buzz we’ve created among our client, our mentors, and ourselves.

Given this new understanding of group dynamics, I feel confident to apply these skills to future projects and team based activities, both in the workplace, and my personal life. At the end of the day, this project has taught me more about myself and the ways in which to efficiently and effectively work with others. Not only did 3 complete strangers research, develop and plan a concept for an alternative revenue stream for a cancer charity, but we learned, grew and overcame hardships to produce a result that not only is exciting, but has lead us to become great friends. I will be forever grateful for this experience and I am excited to see “Sweet Re-Treats” on store shelves soon, providing a way for a passionate charity to provide wonderful experiences for those with cancer.
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