

In the zone

Over 100 university students from around the world headed for the City of Lights for the 16th L'Oréal Brandstorm international finals.

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It was a moment eerily reminiscent of the final minutes of American Idol last month. The tension was palpable when host Ryan Seacrest started to announce that this year's winner was "David." As every fan of the globally popular singing contest knew, both the finalists had identical first names.

The tension was just as taut as the 2008 L'Oréal Brandstorm international finals, held at Showcase underneath the Pont Alexandre III bridge in Paris, recently.

With Blue Dynamics of the United Kingdom and MBM of the United States vying for top spot, nerves on both sides were stretched to breaking point when the emcee announced, "The winner is the United."

Earlier, Monica McQuib, Blake Hadley and Matthew Miller of team MBM had emulated the 2007 successes of their seniors from Brigham Young University in Utah, by winning the Best Communications Campaign award from advertising agency Euro RSCG.

But, claiming the first prize in the international marketing competition still came as a pleasant shock to the final-year advertising students, who are all now interning at different international advertising agencies in New York.

Said Matthew: "We really didn't think we had a chance to win because everyone was so good. Their ideas were all so accessible and innovative."

When asked to describe how they felt about bagging the champion's trophy and 10,000 (RM50,639) for a team



The panel of judges for the preliminary round listening intently to (from left) Nor Faizah, Anthony and Jerry presenting their star product, the skin.

trip to a destination of their choice, his clipped team mates Blake and Monica chipped in with "Wonderful!" and "Happy!" respectively.

The trio won over the judges with its new product packaging inspired by rapper and hip-hop producer Kanye West's eyeshades, and a campaign that "communicates in a language that teens and young adults understand".

Meanwhile, second-placed Cambridge University business students Ben Hayward, Matt Ives and Nicholas Niro impressed the judges with their daring move to target only men with their marketing proposal for Vichy's Capital Soleil sun care line.

As Ben explained during their presentation, "Men are the lost audience. We decided to focus on them because women are over-represented in the sun care industry."

Capitalising on the fact that the skin is negatively charged, the team, which won 25,000 (RM125,370) for a team trip, proposed a positively-charged sun protection cream that can be easily

applied in the shower.

Asia was well-represented in the finals by The Pinnacle from the National University of Singapore. The all-female trio won a 42,500 (RM212,680) team trip for coming in third.

Another all-girl team - VCS Consultants from Universidad Católica Argentina - rounded out the final four.

Intense experience

Waiting to find out who had made it to the finals was a nerve-wracking experience in itself.

None of the participants knew which teams were in until minutes before they had to make their presentation before a panel of judges comprising L'Oréal chief executive officer Jean-Paul Agon, Human Resources executive vice-president Geoff Skingsley, Active Cosmetics Division managing director Brigitte Libermarc, Vichy International managing director Marion Pujol-Antoin, and Euro RSCG Worldwide executive chairman Mercedes Werra.

All 38 teams from around the world



Taking time out to play tourists at the Louvre are (from left) Nor Faizah, Anthony and Jerry. - Courtesy of Nor Faizah Zainal Arifin

- winners of their own national finals - had been divided into four groups earlier in the day, and presented their individual proposals to four different juries at L'Oréal's headquarters.

Malaysia's Les Angeles, from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), was grouped with teams from China, Belgium, Chile, UK, Portugal, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Germany and Italy.

Said UKM Biology student Anthony Yan Kong Loy: "It was very intense because the other teams were very good and the UK's proposal was totally out-of-the-box."

"I think we did well in our presentation and the Q&A. Judge and Vichy International A&A director Stephanie (Enriquez) told us she liked our presentation."

Anthony let on that he couldn't breathe before they announced the teams that had made it to the final round.

Team mate Jerry Lee Ian Jan added: "I really felt that my legs would desert me during the presentation. I didn't dare eat too much before that so butterflies wouldn't revok in my stomach."

"But once we started, I didn't feel nervous at all. I guess I was in the one at that time."

Although Les Angeles did not make it into the finals, it came down to the wire within their group as one of the judges later revealed that they had lost out to the UK team by a very small percentage point.

Said Nor Faizah Zainal Arifin: "Of the three of us, I was the least concerned about getting into the finals. But I was crushed when we didn't make it."

Looking on the bright side, Nor Faizah said that working together on this competition had not only enabled them to learn a lot about marketing, but also strengthened their friendships.

And perhaps, more importantly, they had earned the respect of their peers: "Almost all the teams in their group made it a point to come up to them after the finals to tell them how much they liked Les Angeles' proposal."

Recruitment game

ONE of the main strategies of L'Oréal's human resources department is to recruit its managers young. And one way to accomplish that is by organising competitions for university students.

Geoff Skingsley, the company's human resources executive vice-president, said: "We have four business games, all aimed at giving students hands-on experience through different facets of L'Oréal and the beauty business."

"And clearly the objective is to attract the high potential candidates and persuade them that L'Oréal is a great place to start their career."

Besides L'Oréal Brandstorm, its oldest and longest-running business game, the company also runs L'Oréal Incentive, directed at engineering and supply chain students, L'Oréal e-Strat Challenge for business and management students, and L'Oréal Innovation Lab for science students.

Along the way, the company has also developed close ties with certain institutions around the world, as many of the universities that take part in L'Oréal Brandstorm do so year after year.

This year, 4,617 students from 469 institutions in 38 countries registered for the marketing competition, which saw Sweden, Norway, Finland and Colombia taking part for the first time.

Reflecting the close link between academia and business, last year, the company started organising marketing master classes for lecturers who attend the Brandstorm international finals along with their students.

Said Skingsley: "We have a very high level of engagement not only from students, but also the university



SKINGSLEY: L'Oréal's business games are essential in recruiting young talents.

campuses because we do this (Brandstorm) in partnership with them."

"Yesterday evening, I spent time with professors from 12 different countries who have come along to support their students. So, there is a real pedagogical context to what these students are doing. It is accepted by professors who sometimes integrate it into their university courses, which we think is fabulous."

He added that it was important for lecturers and universities to be committed to the competition, which stretches over several months, so that the students who participate could invest the necessary time and effort in it.

However, Skingsley said the game was ultimately about the students. "It is about their ability to express themselves and show their ideas, and also to show that they can persuade and encourage others to follow them."

Said Skingsley: "We have a very high level of engagement not only from students, but also the university

type of people they want, he noted. "We are always going to play, ultimately, a quality game. We don't need to have contact with half a million students."

"We need just to make sure that if we are going to recruit 2,000 people each year, we have a qualitative mechanism in the best business schools to reach them."

"We put a huge amount of resources into this game. The Vichy teams (for this year's case study) in all the countries are available to the students, as well as packaging agencies, design agencies, advertising agencies."

"So we invest a lot of money and time to ensure that students get the most complete support structure to really bring their ideas to fruition." He added that coordinating the competition from L'Oréal's headquarters alone required 40 staff (RM2,5m) and two full-time staff.

This does not include the budget and resources of its staff and associated advertising agencies in each of the 38 participating countries. "It is as much an investment of people as money," Skingsley said.

Although participants who impress the L'Oréal staff are recruited on an individual basis, the competition has remained a team project for important reasons.

"We want the individual personalities, but they have to be able to work in teams. The games are constructed such that an individual cannot do it on his own. They have to do it in a team."

For Brandstorm, he added: "You can only progress if you make the team work well together. In fact, it is one of the criteria used in our judging scheme during the competition."

Worth the sting

NOR FAIZAH ZAINAL ARIFIN shares her thoughts on the highs and lows of the competition.

WHEN I heard that the United Kingdom was going into the finals of L'Oréal Brandstorm, I was genuinely shocked. My head turned leader, my heart skipped a beat and my vision blurred.

I did not expect to be cut off from presenting our case to the CEO of L'Oréal by the three Cambridge guys. Even if one of them was cute.

Until that moment, I did not know the depth of my desire to win the competition.

In that minute, my mind sprinted through the six months of work my team had dedicated to our presentation. The nocturnal meetings, endless editing sessions, and the ceaseless bickering among us, it seemed like I had wasted six precious months of my life.

When Jerry Anthony and I decided to join L'Oréal Brandstorm, we thought it would not be for fun. That's why we called ourselves Les Angeles (French for "The Angels").

Not because angels are fun, but because it was the first thing that came to Jerry's mind when he signed us up on the last day of registration for the competition in Malaysia.

You can probably guess from our team name that we are not marketing or creative arts students. We are just needy students who were bored and needed something different to do.

We were attracted by the corporate video that said L'Oréal Brandstorm is a real-life marketing class that would introduce us to the corporate world, which was a mystery to us, revealed only in flashes in The Apprentice, or, if it qualifies, Ugly Betty. And we were curious.

L'Oréal Brandstorm was an eye-opener for all three of us.

We didn't just get a glimpse into a multi-billion dollar cosmetics company, we had the chance to stare long and hard, and to take it all in with eyes wide open.

We worked and lived like a real marketing team that was developing and launching a new product for

L'Oréal. This was especially true after we became the Malaysian champion. We had to go through rigorous quality control, i.e. countless discussions, meetings and subsequently, much tweaking and modification of the products and slides.

Every little detail was scrutinised and analysed. Suddenly, we understood terms like Point of Sale and Barriers to Entry. Every day, I marvelled at the amount of knowledge we picked up on psychology, economics, art. Things that never made sense suddenly seemed as clear as day.

I loved and hated every moment of it.

Getting the chance to work with an international advertising agency like Euro RSCG was another out-of-this-world experience. We learnt that in the advertising world, an idea could transform society.

We learnt how words and pictures work on the five senses to create an experience for not only those who view an advertisement, but also its creators.

I was personally transfixed by what a creative human mind could produce, and how one simple object can become iconic.

The experience unleashed a creative side of me that I never knew I had.

The minute after I heard the announcement of our loss, I mourned. Then, I thought, and remembered, I did not take part in this to win. I took part in it because it offered me an adventure into terrains that were unfamiliar to me, to learn and experience.

Looking wistfully at my adventure, as Amelia Earhart so aptly put it: "Adventure is worthwhile, even when you are let down."

L'Oréal Brandstorm has been one of the most enriching and empowering experiences I have had. Not winning still stings, but I don't think I will ever regret the time I spent on it.

It was all totally worth it.



Nor Faizah with teammates Anthony (standing) and Jerry striking a pose during the photo shoot at the competition. - TAN SHOW CHIN / The Star



Presenting their product range inspired by Kanye West's eyeshades are the 2008 L'Oréal Brandstorm winners (from left) Blake, Monica and Matt from the United States. - Courtesy of L'Oréal

Consumer insight and presentation skills score points at the L'Oréal Brandstorm national finals.

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It took a moment or two to sink in, but once the realisation that he and his teammates would be going to Paris on an all-expenses-paid trip hit him, Lee Lin Jian started jumping for joy.

"He even pinched me to see whether or not it was real," exclaimed teammate Nor Faizah Zainal Ariffin, rubbing the sore spot on her arm ruefully.

The two Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia students together with their mate Anthony Yan Kang Loy, make up team Les Anges - winner of this year's L'Oréal Brandstorm national finals, held in Kuala Lumpur recently.

Aside from winning a RM5,000 travel voucher, RM500 worth of Vichy products each and the challenge trophy, plaques and certificates, the team will also be representing Malaysia at the international finals of the competition in Paris in June.

Said Lin Jian: "It's very surreal, it's all a mixture of feelings and a rush of adrenaline."

Nor Faizah added: "We need time to adjust."

With all of them about to sit for their exams within the next few days, winning the top prize was certainly worth all the extra effort and stress.

Their win was even more surprising as none of them are marketing or advertising students. In fact, Nor Faizah is a Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) student, while Lin Jian and Anthony are doing Chemistry and Biology, respectively.

The extra edge

Tasked with creating a new sun care product range and educational communications strategy for Vichy Capital Soleil, it was the team's logical marketing strategies, consumer insight and confidence that gave them the edge over the other four finalists.

Chief judge and STV chief executive officer Ahmad Izham Omar commented directly after their presentation: "It is not easy to present a lot of information in a comprehensive way that is easily understandable to the layman. The logical flow (of the presentation) was very good."

Focusing on the concept of "Convenient sun care protection that feels like a second skin", the team emphasised creating products that are non-greasy, convenient and protect the skin.

Said Nor Faizah: "There were only two or three products we could do, so we played around with the packaging and structure of the products."

The team ended up with "the cube" - a box containing sunscreen cream in tablet form that melts upon body contact, "the slide" - a two-in-one container that holds both sunscreen and after-sun protection, and "the ice-stick", which contains after-sun care.

Not forgetting the educational strategy, the team proposed a mobile 3x3m perspex cube - mirroring its star product "the cube" - that would be placed in strategic locations to raise awareness of skin sun care and offer free consultations to the public.

Close competition

Coming in a close second was team OnePoint3 from IACT (Institute Advertising Communications Training).

With the slogan "Keep your cool", team members Stephanie Loh Ai Yien, Louisa Tang Chee Siew and Wanxin Tuang Koi Yung certainly kept their cool to give an energetic presentation.

Focusing on the affluent, young female market, the team showcased its Glace ("ice" in French) product range, which features sunblock in the form of beads that are dispensed

Surreal surprise



We're going to Paris! (from left) UKM students Anthony, Nor Faizah and Lin Jian posing with the challenge trophy.



The judges comprised (from left) Wong, Dr Allan Yee, Choy, Ahmad Izham and Couve.

by a slim mechanical container.

Their marketing strategy not only included advertising on social networking sites like Facebook, Friendster and MySpace, but also emphasised training and providing incentives for sales promoters.

Their presentation was a result of months' hard work. Said Winnie: "I haven't had dinner with my family for about two weeks."

Louisa shared: "At the beginning, our ideas were all over the place. We had to slowly narrow them down to the final products and campaign."

Meanwhile, Switch from LimkokWing University of Creative Technology (LUCT), was pleasantly surprised at its third position. "I didn't have any expectations," said Graphic Design student Charles Chaw Chee Wah. "It was quite cool; I wasn't disappointed or overly-excited."

His teammate, Wilson Santoso, agreed: "I just feel tired and relieved that it's all over."

Unlike the other teams which wore colour-coordinated outfits, Charles, Wilson and teammate Lee Sze Mun wore their own individual outfits to emphasise the tone of their campaign, which was "active, expressive and fearless".

Their product range comprised transparent sunscreen roll-on, sunscreen wipes and also sunblock in capsule form. Their marketing strategy included organising the biggest outdoor event of the year: themed "Sun Lovers Unite!" and various fun art, dance and design competitions.

For their efforts, OnePoint3 won a RM3,000 travel voucher and a RM400 Vichy product hamper each, while Switch received a RM2,000 travel voucher and RM300 worth of Vichy products each.

The two other finalists, Indigo Child from IACT and Universiti Sains Malaysia's Mega Idea, received consolation prizes of RM250 worth of Vichy products per member and certificates.

»The teams came up with very strong marketing programmes that will strengthen the Vichy brand and product.«

VICHY BRAND MANAGER WONG YAT CHOONG

Tough decision

Said judge and Vichy brand manager Wong Yat Choong: "It was definitely a tough job choosing the winners. All five of them were excellent."

"They really got the consumer insights, and came up with very strong marketing programmes that will strengthen the brand and product. They also had strong educational programmes."

Wong was also pleased that all the teams had diverse presentation styles and products. He and Izham were joined on the judging panel by L'Oréal Malaysia and Singapore managing director Jean-Francois Couve, advertising agency Euro RSCG Kuala Lumpur managing director Chry Lee Kien and Dermatological Society of Malaysia president Dr Allan Yee Kim Chye.

Izham, who was also a judge for the 2005 edition of the competition, said: "The quality has improved tremendously, and there are a lot more different institutions participating now."

"It was a very tough decision because everyone was very, very good."

He added that the judges had to debate for quite a while before deciding between the top two teams. "I think we chose the right team which will make Malaysia proud."