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Connecting SMC Students and Moraga Merchants

By Sophie Braccini



Matt Lebel Photo provided

There are some 2500 undergraduate students at Saint Mary's College. They represent about 15% of Moraga's population. But Moraga does not feel like a college town, and some would like this to change. To that end a professor and a student, in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce, have launched a pair of initiatives aimed at changing the perception of students and giving a boost to local retail.

Adjunct Professor Mary Coe teaches Statistics in the School of Economics and Business Administration, and is also one of the three members of Moraga's new Economic Development Team. She and 40 enthusiastic students recently completed a project designed to find out how Moraga businesses could be made more appealing to students. Her class visited the shopping centers in Moraga and Lafayette, heard lectures on community marketing, and conducted research into students' shopping habits.

In their reports, the students expressed their concern about the feel of the two Moraga shopping centers, which they described as having "no sense of place" and being rundown and empty. A few retailers, such as Loard's and Pennini's, offer products that are appealing to students, but most do not. The students received a positive response from store owners - local businesses want to please students and communicate with them, but often they do not know how.

Enter Saint Mary's sophomore Matt Lebel, who has been involved with the marketing of Moraga's Captain Vineyard since his freshman year. The work he did for the Captains inspired him to become an advocate for Moraga businesses on campus. When he heard about

Coe's project, he reached out to her class and teamed up with some of the students to create MarketMoraga.com, a Facebook and internet-based marketing concept. The Moraga Chamber of Commerce helped drum up support.

The survey that Coe's team conducted indicates that the number one information vehicle for the students is Facebook, accessed via their phones or computers. "Most students use Facebook as their primary media," says Lebel, "the site and page we created make it easy for businesses to track specific users, i.e. Saint Mary's students, and design ad campaigns that are made just for them."

For \$40 a month, participating businesses get a presence on the website and Facebook page. One of the keys to the success of the site is that students work with businesses to create ads with special offers designed to attract students. In order for this to work, businesses need to participate and students need to "like" the Facebook page so they can receive the offers directly in their news feed. "My objective is to get 500 'likes' in the first week," said Lebel, who officially

launched the site on 2/6.

To attract students Lebel places ads on the Saint Mary's students Facebook page and entices them with offers such as, "Like the Facebook page and win a 20% discount for..."

"I spoke with Matt and we are brainstorming ideas to promote the theater," says New Rheem Theatre Director Beau Behan, who was shocked to see in the survey that 69% of the students who responded said they never go to the theater. Susan Captain says that traffic on her website has increased since linking to MarketMoraga. "We offer a discount for a tour and wine tasting and hope to get more business that way," she explains.

"This is a very positive and creative solution in our ongoing effort to get the town and the campus to work together," says Chamber president Edy Schwartz. "The first objective of the class was to get the students more engaged in Moraga," says Coe, "they complain that there is nothing to do, that they always have to take their car and go to Walnut Creek. We wanted to create a link between the town's businesses and the students for their mutual benefit."



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