

# International MSU team helps MC in tourism efforts

## Improving signage, increasing awareness top priorities

**BY JERI PACKER**  
VOICE STAFF WRITER

Students from as far as Taiwan brought a fresh perspective

to a marketing research project conducted in the small town of Marine City.

A five-member international team of Michigan State University graduate students chose the riverfront city as the focus of a class project for their course work in advertising and promotion management.

Young adults from Asia and the Middle East partnered together for the "Marketing Marine City" project. Team members were: Yu-Wen (Yvette) Wang and Li-Ting (Phoebe) Lin of Taipei, Taiwan;

Sangruo Huang of Hangzhou, China; Weijing Liu of Shenzhen, China and Amina Lahbabi of Tangier, Morocco.

Marine City's tourism initiative has picked up steam ever since the Citizens Action Group began a focused effort to promote the city two years ago. Later, acceptance into the Michigan State University Extension Creating Entrepreneurial Communities program took the city to the next level. Early this year, the Chamber of Commerce took over the effort when it established its Market-

ing Committee. The committee will now focus on implementing the marketing team's recommendations.

"This study will be a critical component in our decision-making and expenditures," Marine City Marketing Committee Chairperson Georgia Phelan said. "We have interest and support for our tourism initiative, but lacked a comprehensive, professional study."

"As MSU students in the master's degree program, and as

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international students, the resumes, experience and education level of this team will propel our project forward in a much more specific direction.”

The team began their research in March, with Miriam Phelan of the Marine City Citizens First Savings Bank leading them on a tour of the city. Citizens First is one of the Creating Entrepreneurial Communities program sponsors and a member of the local Chamber of Commerce. The students concluded their course work in May with recommendations for improving the city’s potential for tourism.

It didn’t take long for the team to notice one of Marine City’s biggest marketing handicaps: difficulty in finding it.

“Finding the city was hard as there are no signs on the highway indicating what exit to take to get there,” team leader Amina Lahbabi said. “We had to use directions given to us by Miriam Phelan and we had also been on the phone with her for five minutes or more. This problem definitely affects potential visitors to the city. Many people drive past without even getting to know what beautiful things the

city has to offer.”

Lahbabi, away from her hometown in Tangier for almost two years, believes that a simple, creative image or message has the power to positively changing people’s perceptions. She looked forward to helping Marine City formulate a marketing image.

Once she arrived in the city, she immediately sensed its unique charm, even before the city had bloomed into its springtime colors.

“Even then, the colorful Victorian houses inspired the image of a cheerful and friendly town,” she said. “I certainly liked the waterfront and the old architecture of the shops and stores along the river.”

One of the most significant recommendations for marketing the town involved a technique called branding.

“Branding is a long process that, if started now, will establish the name of Marine City in the minds of its potential visitors,” Lahbabi said. “In this framework, we created a logo and a color theme that will be consistently used in all Marine City communication and advertising supports.”

Creating awareness was another crucial element in the marketing process. Lahbabi said

they first started with identifying a profitable target market for Marine City and then developed a plan to promote it through different media sources.

“Awareness building was to be carried out through a combination of media tools, (such as) outdoors, print, Internet, and broadcast that the target market accesses the most,” she said.

The city’s assets included its location on the waterfront, its well-preserved historical heritage and the antique shops. Lahbabi said the combination of assets was a “strong selling point” for the town.

She believes her status as a foreigner and an avid traveler gave her an ability to provide more insight to the project.

“I think being from another country did help,” she said. “It is important in these kinds of projects to detach oneself from the object under study. It was easier for me to apply no bias to my recommendations and to look at the issue at hand from a broader and more comprehensive angle.”

Georgia Phelan and the Marketing Committee are now studying the 46-page report from the students, using it as a catalyst for current and future marketing projects.

The study shows Marine City’s target market is baby



Photos courtesy to THE VOICE

Back row, left to right: Li-Ting (Phoebe) Lin, Weijing Liu, Sangruo Huang, Yu-Wen (Yvette) Wang and Miriam Phelan. Front: Amina Lahbabi

boomers from the Metro Detroit area and those within two hours drive time from Marine City. Elementary school children were identified as a secondary target market. Also, not included in the report, is Southwestern Ontario as part of the target market, Phelan said.

"Increasing awareness is the most urgent task for the city's tourism development," she said.

The group is making use of the Internet, outdoor ads, radio and print media in their promotional efforts.

They took advantage of a rather large marketing opportunity recently, made possible through a grant from the Community Foundation of St. Clair County's regional marketing initiative.

Five giant billboards are prominently displayed along major thoroughfares with the names of six waterfront communities from Algonac to Lexington listed under the phrase, "Discover the blue shores of Eastern Michigan."



Following the recommendations of Marketing/Advertising grad students at MSU, Marine City is participating in a regional marketing program with other local communities to appear on five billboards located on Interstate 75, Interstate 94 and Hall Road.

"We felt there was a need to take a regional approach to supporting the waterfront downtowns in the county," Phelan said. "With what money we would have spent alone for one billboard for one month, we got five for three months by taking a much more regional approach."

The signs will be appearing on Interstate 75, Interstate 94, and Hall Road, across from the new Partridge Creek Mall.

Linking Marine City to state and county Web sites is another step in expanding consumer awareness of the town. By clicking on bluewater.org and mich.org for tourism, potential visitors can also click on Marine City to find out what it has to offer.

Phelan observed another benefit to the city's marketing efforts, called civic tourism.

"What's good for tourism

also benefits its residents," she said. "Hanging flower baskets in town makes the city look welcoming and inviting to visitors, but also makes it nicer for the residents," she said.

Also recommended in the report were sponsoring a major, distinctive festival and maintaining the city parks and public facilities, along with infrastructure and business training for local business owners.

Ongoing projects include maintaining a yearly visitor's brochure and keeping the city Web site updated.

A new architectural walking tour promises to be a draw for visitors, along with the upcoming Concerts in the Park series. A new quarterly leadership summit meeting to coordinate the town's activities and events will also keep marketing efforts organized and focused.

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