

# BUSINESS

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## Inventureworks develops products and young talent

By Randy Tucker  
The Cincinnati Enquirer

Beating the competition to the punch in the highly competitive consumer-goods industry requires a steady stream of new-product ideas.

That necessity was the mother of Inventureworks — a joint project between downtown Cincinnati's Northlich, a communications and brand consulting firm, and the University of Cincinnati.

The program is designed to bring together UC students from a variety of disciplines — including industrial design, architecture and business — for one academic quarter.

During the 10-week program, the students are divided into teams and given specific product development tasks for clients of Northlich's BrandStorm division.

BrandStorm is Northlich's new-product development consulting arm with clients including Procter & Gamble, Speedo, StarKist, Linens 'N Things and Whirlpool.



**inventureworks**

Businesses joining with schools to focus on specific aspects of new-product development, such as marketing, is nothing new.

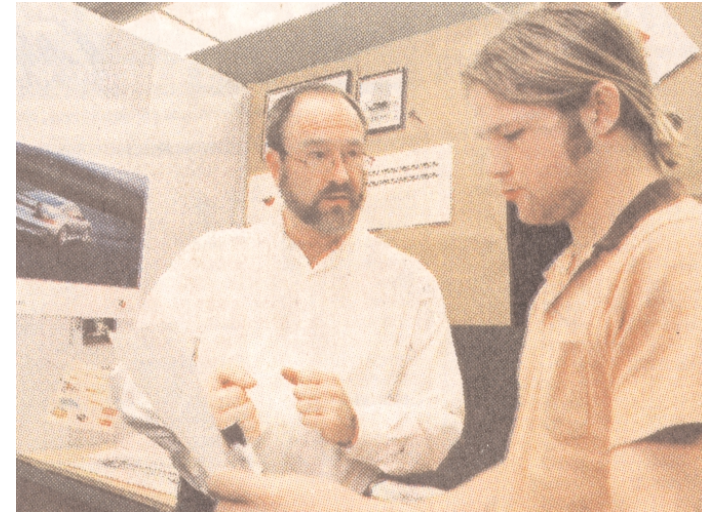
But Inventureworks is unique, its founders and participants say, because of its multilayered approach.

“The most interesting part for me was working with the marketing kids,” said Ramsey Ford, a third-year industrial design student at UC and an Inventureworks alumnus. “In a lot of our projects in industrial design, you just come up with whatever creative solutions you have, do a drawing, make a model and say, 'I'm going to sell this.'”

“Working with the marketing kids brought in a whole different element,” he said. “You had to research everything and decide why you were doing what you were doing, and have it make sense in terms of 'will this make money or not?' I guess it was a little bit more real-world.”

BrandStorm consultants and UC faculty members helped develop the customized curriculum that Inventureworks' students use to create such things as new-product prototypes and marketing concepts for BrandStorm clients.

Those clients have exclusive rights to the fruits of the Inventureworks projects they sponsor.



**Inventure works participants** Ramsey Ford (right), a third year industrial design student at the University of Cincinnati, and Dale Murray, assistant professor of industrial design at UC, review plans for a confidential project for Procter & Gamble.

Those clients compensate UC for materials, overhead costs and faculty, and pay Northlich a fee based on the scope of the project, Northlich said.

“Inventureworks students are working on real-world new-product development projects, and they're doing it in cross-functional teams that reflect the organizational structure of most businesses,” said Mark Serrienne, Northlich's CEO. “It gives them a great head start on their careers.”

Mr. Serrienne said he thinks Inventureworks has the potential to be a national model.

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“Just as Stanford University created the talent pool that was the genesis of the high-tech industry, we believe Inventureworks has the potential to bring independent resources together and help transform this region into a global center for new-product innovation,” he said.

Steve Evans, director of product development for P&G's commercial products group, said Inventureworks allows consumer-goods makers to tap the unspoiled perspective of talented young people who basically compress the product development cycle into a 10-week academic quarter.

“Innovation often gets stymied within corporations by the length of time it takes to get corporate support for new-to-the-world ideas,” Mr. Evans said. Inventureworks allows companies to “quickly prototype an idea, then use that prototype to capture corporate imagination and refine your concept with consumers.”

P&G was the first BrandStorm client to sponsor an Inventureworks project, this past winter quarter at UC.

Mr. Evans worked closely with Northlich BrandStorm consultants and UC professors to develop the curriculum for a confidential pilot project.

UC students participating in the program last winter developed models, marketing plans and designs for a “branded product and delivery system” that P&G wants to keep under wraps until more research has been conducted, Mr. Evans said.

He said the Cincinnati-based consumer-goods giant had already developed a new technology that it wanted to market, but handed it over to Inventureworks students to create a “branded experience.”

Mr. Evans said P&G is reviewing the students' work, and “while I doubt that we'll take any specific end product of any team and do it literally as it was done, a lot of the ideas on how to create the experience and features that would enable the experience, we're going to view.”

While it remains to be seen whether any of the final recommendations will be incorporated into actual production, Ann Welsh — a UC business professor involved with the Inventureworks projects — sees a huge internal upside for students.

“If I were an employer looking for people to hire, I would want to start with this program,” Ms. Welsh said. “These are kids who are

transforming themselves, from people who just know a lot of stuff, but don't quite know what to do with it, to people who know how to do something that is of value to a client. These kids are hitting the ground flying, not running.”