Acning Thai tourism test

SMU emerges runner-up in Thai business challenge, pipped by only a nose, reports KELVIN SAM

T WAS hard not to be impressed by the four undergraduates. The Singapore Management University (SMU) team spoke with polished professionalism and quiet ease even during an informal interview.

The SMU team had just returned from the gruelling 40-hour-long Thammasat Undergraduate Business Challenge. Hosted by renowned Thammasat University and sponsored by PricewaterhouseCoopers Thailand, this year’s event saw teams analysing and preparing a comprehensive solution to a real-life business-oriented problem.

Comprising of Jonathan Ban Yong Teck, Rebecca Wong Li-Jun, Shawn Heng Yew Keng and Kelvin Kwek Hui Sen, the SMU team had to pit their skills against 15 other teams, with some of them coming from prestigious institutions such as McGill University, the University of Washington and the National University of Singapore.

Unexpected twist

Each team presented their case solutions during a 20-minute presentation, followed by a 15-minute question and answer session before two separate panels of judges in the preliminary and final rounds. To ensure the practicality of the solutions presented, the judging panel consisted of professionals from various industries as well as managing partners from PricewaterhouseCoopers.

This year’s business problem offered an interesting spin for the participants. Instead of preparing a solution for a commercial company, the teams had to produce a plan focusing on Thailand’s tourism industry. They were required to advise the Tourism Authority of Thailand, a government agency, on the problems highlighted within the case.

“[The case study] was harder than we expected,” noted Jonathan Ban Yong Teck. “We expected to be confined to a hotel room for 40 hours. ‘We were surprised when we were told that food and beverages would be brought to us in our hotel room,’ he said.

The team did not disappoint the judges. Rolling up their sleeves, they produced a comprehensive strategy and presented it with a narrative story-teller approach.

Thai-centric thrust

Using the analogy of a limited seating restaurant which requires its customers to buy more, the team analysed the case correctly by assuming that Thailänd required sustainable revenue growth.

“Our strategy was three-pronged. We suggested increased marketing of value-added services such as spa services, enhanced cooperation among local players and customising new branding strategy,” added Rebecca. “I guess the judges liked our solution because we always tried to

bear Thai culture in mind when brain-storming. We wanted the judges to know that we respected Thai culture and we didn’t want to change any part of it.”

The team consisting of Jonathan Ban Yong Teck, Rebecca Wong Li-Jun, Shawn Heng Yew Keng and Kelvin Kwek Hui Sen was placed behind McGill University by a narrow margin of 0.1 of a point to be the first runners-up of Thammasat Undergraduate Business Challenge 2005.

All four members of the team unanimously declared the entire experience to be thoroughly enjoyable. “I would say that our success in this competition was a result of the training provided by our professors and our university’s business case club, Cognitare,” said Kelvin.