YOU know your company’s challenges, but does your new brand manager know them too? If you were L’Oreal, though, you probably would have more confidence in your brand managers.

Since 1993, the company’s annual global competition, L’Oreal Brandstorm, has also been a recruitment tool to hire the most suitable minds for the business.

Since its inception, L’Oreal Brandstorm has attracted more than 14,300 participants from universities around the world. Introduced here just four years ago, it is already making a splash on the local university circuit.

This year, the 40 or so teams that joined at the outset were whittled down to eight from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Singapore Management University (SMU).

Participants had to present their integrated communications strategy for Lancôme’s Body Care line — and the Singapore Management University (SMU).

She said that the rigorous demands of the contest have helped the company identify “true talents”, which is not possible through half-hour or hour-long interviews.

The company devises 18-month programmes to aclimatisate and match new recruits to individual brands within the company. L’Oreal is home to about 20 brands, including L’Oreal Paris, Garnier, Maybelline New York and Lancôme.

Mrs Huang said some of the strengths of the winning team included the ability to pick out Lancôme’s ultimate selling points by studying the competition.

“They researched other brands, and proposed a range that is not found in the market,” she said.

They also managed to sell their ideas to the judges despite the bombardment of questions. What Mrs Huang also found impressive was that instead of proposing a new range, which is “expensive to launch,” La Difference answered customers’ needs by introducing a line of booster products to prepare one’s skin to better absorb Lancôme’s existing products.

“That was very clever, because they found out that body skin is thicker than the face’s, and a lot of customers have noted that body products are less effective,” she said.

She and the rest of the panel, including Mrs Jill Klein, associate professor of marketing at Insead, and Mr Thomas Neo, CEO of Publicis Singapore, were unanimous in picking La Difference as the winners.

“They are a team with a passion — knowing the customer, our retailers and the trends. That’s what we’re looking for.”

L’Oreal was also very pleased with the high calibre of all the participants.

“They were very sensitive to market analyses this year compared to the previous year,” she said.

“All eight teams presented totally different concepts, and each one was very refreshing. There was no duplication of ideas.”

This year’s winners were an all-female team, but past winners have included all-male teams as well, and many of the participants this year were also male.

“Last year, in fact, the winner in the international finals was an all-male team, and we recruited all of them,” Mrs Huang said.

Third-year NUS marketing major Chen Qimin, who was awarded the “Most Outstanding Presenter (Individual),” knows what it is like being in such a team.

“It’s three guys exploring the minds of women. It was three months of research, and talking to the consumer.”

The girls from La Difference said that one of the incentives for signing up was knowing that their resumés would land in the right hands.

“Going through the process put us in the shoes of a brand manager,” Ms Rebecca Wong said.

“We definitely see it as a very challenging role in a dynamic company.”

Underlining Mrs Huang’s statements about the effectiveness of Brandstorm as a recruitment tool, she said: “I think what set our team apart was that we listened closely to customers and really understood what they wanted. Our strategy was to never underestimate the consumer.”

Alvin Lai is a freelance writer.

To send article contributions, comments, rants and story ideas, e-mail recruit@sph.com.sg

When you contribute to The Straits Times Recruit, we take it that you agree, at no charge, to allow us to use, archive, resell or reproduce the letters and contributions in any way and in any medium.