

AU business students cook up ideas to market grills

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ALFRED, NY The unmistakable aroma of a cookout began emanating from in front of Alfred University's Olin Building at around noon Thursday. Soon, scores of students had gathered there and were munching on free hamburgers and hotdogs. The food was prepared on a half-dozen charcoal and gas grills by students of Dr. Amy Rummel, professor of marketing. They weren't the type of grills one would find in the local department store: one floated in an inflatable swimming pool; another was mounted to the front of a golf cart. The cookout was the culmination of Dr. Rummel's New Product Development class, in which students spent a semester conducting market analyses on new types of outdoor grills and constructing prototypes. Rummel said students were encouraged to "think out of the box" as they tried to develop products that could fill niches in a market already saturated by big-name grill manufacturers like Weber and Coleman. "One of the objectives (of the course) was to get students to think creatively, to be entrepreneurs," said Dr. Rummel. "I wanted them to come up with new ideas and create something that could be brought to the market." Students began the semester studying the grill market, determining the competition and then trying to find new ways to fill the market. The students, divided into six teams, conducted public surveys in which they presented their ideas. After using the survey results to fine-tune their projects, students developed marketing plans, created advertisements, drafted news releases and determined the consumers they would target with their product. Each team was given \$75 to construct their grill. In all cases, modifications were made to existing charcoal and gas grills. One of the most unique and eye-catching creations was The Floating Flame, made by the team of Mike Huffman, Alex Crowell, Richard Coyne and Mark Plesac. A small charcoal cooker mounted on a wooden platform, it floated in an inflatable swimming pool, beef patties sizzling on its stainless steel grill. "A lot of the people we surveyed liked the idea of a floating grill," said Huffman, a senior business administration major from Ithaca, NY. "They thought it would be great to have out on the lake." Nick Hawryschuk, a senior business administration major from Seneca Falls, NY, was on a team that created a grill that was mounted to the front of golf cart. "The people we (surveyed) liked the idea," Hawryschuk said. "People like to eat on the golf course. No one has thought of this, so we think it would have a place in the market." Hawryschuk said the grill could be marketed to golf course operators, who theoretically would charge an additional cart rental fee to golfers who wanted to cook their lunch between holes. Other creations included the Dawn to Dusk grill, outfitted so that it could be used to cook any meal: breakfast (bacon and sausage, eggs and pancakes), lunch (burgers and dogs) or dinner (steak); the Truck Bed, a grill mounted to the tailgate of a pickup truck, ready to use when the gate is lowered; and a grill that can be carried in a specially-insulated backpack. One team proposed marketing a grill using the Honda brand name. Huffman believes there could be a place in the grill market for The Floating Flame. "I think it could fill a niche. Some of the people we surveyed said they'd buy one," he said. "They didn't want to spend a lot of money on it. It would probably be a fad product, something that would be popular for a short time." Regardless of whether or not any of the students' creations ever make it into the grill market, the students in Rummel's class say they've benefited from the course. "The goal is to help the students gain confidence in their marketing abilities and develop the skills they need to work in the field," Rummel said. "I think they've gained an appreciation for how much work it takes to get a product launched." "It teaches you to be creative and explore new ideas," said Jessica Sundberg, a junior business major from Acton, MA, who was part the team that developed the golf cart-mounted grill. "I didn't know much about marketing to begin with," said Jason West, a senior psychology major. "Now I know how much is involved with marketing, what goes into developing and promoting a product." "I had never done a marketing plan before and didn't realize how detailed it was," Huffman said. "If I do go into marketing, this experience will help me."