

## Monks and MBAs: A dynamic duo

Tom Gallagher | Jan. 26, 2010



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### Mission Management

The arrival of digital media is affecting every aspect of society from policing, to health care, to education, to news reporting and to entertainment. The greeting-card business is not immune. An estimated 300 million e-cards are sent each year. The legendary Hallmark Cards, based in Kansas City, Mo., and celebrating its 100th birthday this year, sent more than 47 million e-cards in 2008 alone.

One business owner, a group of Benedictine monks who are used to centuries of ink and parchment, is also adjusting to this new reality.

The Printery House is an apostolic work of Conception Abbey, a Benedictine monastery situated in the rolling farmlands of northwest Missouri. It produces stationery, prayer cards, icons and other items related to the Catholic faith, selling 5 million cards a year.

"We noticed that after 50 years of producing and selling Christian greeting cards that our revenues were beginning to plateau," said Abbot Gregory Polan.

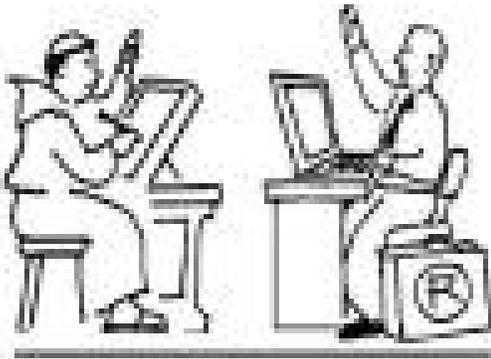
But how does a monastery go about accommodating technological advances? Hire consultants for the job, but not just any consultants.

An interesting confluence of relationships created a unique opportunity.

Fr. Thomas Curran, an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales, began making the two-hour drive to the abbey for his own monthly spiritual retreat shortly after his arrival in 2006 as president of Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Mo., and he became friends with the monks.

At the same time, Clyde Wendel, who serves both on the abbot's volunteer financial council and as chair of Rockhurst's board of trustees, raised the issue with Curran about the university somehow helping the abbey plan for the future. Curran took it from there.

After discussions with the faculty of Rockhurst's Helzberg School of Management and a campus visit by the monks, the idea took shape to invite the business school's second-year Executive Fellows to take on the abbey as a client. To be admitted into the fellows program, students are required to have at least seven years of professional experience.



In August 2009, Curran and some 23 MBA students traveled to the

abbey to live the life of a monk and to engage their new client in both formal and informal settings.

"It was important for the students to get to understand our mission, vision and values, and to pray with us, to socialize with us and to meet us," said Polan.

"The abbey is a going concern with a lot of assets, such as land, the Printery House, guest and hospitality services, the monastery and the seminary," said Craig Sasse, director of executive education and assistant professor of management at Rockhurst. "The abbey is a great 'live case' for the students."

Polan said, "The Printery House serves our mission of spreading the Gospel and it puts bread and butter on our table." In addition, the abbey welcomes 8,000 visitors a year for retreats through its hospitality center, educates seminarians from 22 dioceses, and is a vibrant monastery.

"As a Jesuit university, we are focused on lifelong learning that incorporates reflection, discernment, gratitude and service," said Curran. To this end, the Executive Fellows program has a strong focus on developing the whole person, he said.

The Abbey Project, along with Operation Breakthrough, which is an inner-city program that helps the poor (*NCR*, July 6, 2007), represents initiatives where MBA students are applying their expertise to benefit important not-for-profit organizations. The consulting is student-driven with faculty being called upon when needed.

"I chose to go to Rockhurst because of their commitment to corporate social responsibility," said Margaret Keough, marketing and communications manager for Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City.

"Most of us had no experience working with monks or a monastery," said Mike Thursby, an Executive Fellow who acts as the relationship manager. By day, Thursby is a senior manager of corporate development for Sprint-Nextel.

For non-Catholic Julie Hull, who serves as project manager, "I didn't know what to expect." Yet, the monks were very open to dialogue and all ideas, she said. Hull is a vice president for client organization at Cerner.

This past fall the students and the monks met three times, exchanged weekly e-mails and when Polan traveled to Kansas City, he scheduled meetings with the consultants.

"It was important to employ rigorous research and data mining as we prepared our recommendations," said Hull.

In October, the students unveiled a 21-page PowerPoint presentation with recommendations. Together, the monks and the students identified the publishing arm as the initial place to begin the relationship.

The students identified certain needs of the Printery House, such as a product-pricing review, a marketing plan, product-mix review, the development of a supply-chain map, and the use of a cost-accounting model.

The next step was to create a "concept of work" document that would serve all parties, manage expectations and identify roles. During the second half of the fall semester, the plan was developed, edited and finalized. The students took on specific responsibilities such as operational efficiency and revenue growth.

In early December all parties accepted the concept of work.

"This spring semester we will be undertaking focus groups, supply-chain

analysis and marketing studies," said Hull. "We expect to deliver concrete recommendations and next steps in April."

Prior to the May graduation, the incoming second-year class will pick up where their colleagues left off.

"The Abbey Project has been an unexpected pleasure of the academic program," said Hull.

Thursby agreed. "The monks are fabulous and the abbey an energizing place," he said.

"With the time the monks devote to prayer, they are incredibly focused in their work," said Keough.

In three years' time, each operating unit of the abbey will benefit from the consultation by Rockhurst's Executive Fellows.

[Tom Gallagher writes for *NCR*'s regular Mission Management column. His e-mail address is tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

### **Related Web sites**

Conception Abbey  
[www.conceptionabbey.org](http://www.conceptionabbey.org)

The Printery House  
[www.printeryhouse.org](http://www.printeryhouse.org)

Helzberg School of Management, Rockhurst University  
[www.rockhurst.edu/hsom](http://www.rockhurst.edu/hsom)

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