

STUDENT/PUBLIC PARTNERSHIP

Shining light on firefighting

Cabrillo students pitch marketing plan to Santa Cruz Fire

By TOVIN LAPAN

tlapan@santacruzsentinel.com

APTOS — Firefighters often say there is a common misconception that all they do is douse blazes.

A group of Cabrillo College students who took on a project to design a marketing plan for the Santa Cruz Fire Department also wondered what firefighters do all day, until they shadowed some of them on duty.

"We were surprised by how much we didn't know," Cabrillo student Randi Lewis said of her four-student team. "Firefighters and the fire department do a lot that the public just has no awareness of. They are constantly doing training and getting various certifications, not to mention cliff rescues and providing paramedic services."

In fact one of the frequent questions the department receives is why each fire truck carries one paramedic, Santa Cruz Fire Chief Ron Oliver said.

"I received a letter not too long ago from a man who questioned the need for paramedics on fire engines, saying that we could leave that

to ambulances," Oliver said. "Then he had a heart attack, and he realized we were able to get to him faster. He said: 'You saved my life.'"

Oliver was looking to expand the public's understanding of the fire departments duties, but had no budget for marketing. So, in late 2010 he approached Cabrillo business instructor Ray Kaupp about using the fire department as a project for one of his marketing courses.

Kaupp pitched the idea to his marketing principles class. Lewis and three other students, Lori Bradshaw, Nic Elston and Mike Mathes, volunteered, intrigued by the idea of working on a project that had the chance of actually being implemented.

The students researched the fire department, developed a marketing strategy, and pitched it to Oliver and his colleagues at the end of the quarter to rave reviews.

"I was impressed by the enthusiasm of the class," Oliver said. "They really got into it, and came up with some very good ideas."

One suggestion that is already being implemented was to get the department to

frame fire damage in a different manner.

"[The students] came up with the idea that the conversation should not be about cost, but about value delivered," Kaupp said. "A lot of times when you read in the paper about an incident, it talks about how much the loss was. What it doesn't say is because of the fire department, they averted \$1 million in damage or saved a building that was worth \$2 million."

Also, Lewis is continuing to work on the project as an intern, and will be developing another of the group's suggestions: a Facebook page to help communicate with the public and spread the department's

message.

The students said it was a challenge since the fire department is not the typical organization seeking a marketing strategy.

"It was definitely a unique challenge," Lewis, 22, said. "Usually you think marketing refers to a product or a nonprofit. There was no price-based promotion to market around. Some of the typical marketing tools are relevant. It was a good challenge."

Kaupp said that marketing can apply to any group delivering a message and service to a particular constituency, and that he will be looking for more partnerships for his students in the future.