Real-world observation: WT student-faculty research to benefit Las Vegas production

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A West Texas A&M University team’s research will help determine how to drive tourists down the neon-encrusted chute that is Las Vegas Boulevard and into a particular theater.

Earlier this month, faculty and students from WT presented to representatives of Las Vegas MGM Grand and Cirque du Soleil the final results of market research gathered in October, said Dennis LaFontaine, MGM Grand marketing director.

MGM Grand and Cirque invited seven students from WT’s Students in Free Enterprise chapter and three faculty members to tackle the research. Participating faculty members were director of graduate studies in business Nick Gerlich, professor of mass communication Leigh Browning and mass communications instructor Lori Westermann.

“Ka,” Cirque du Soleil’s show at the MGM Grand, vies for audience share not only with a number of concerns and productions but also with seven other fantastical shows created by the Quebec circus company, Gerlich said. An eighth cirque, based on late pop king Michael Jackson, is set to debut next year.

Eighty artists from around the world perform in “Ka,” a blend of acrobatic feats, dance, puppetry, projections and martial arts, according to Cirque du Soleil’s website.

“Here’s what’s happening in Las Vegas: The average visitor is spending only 2.7 days as opposed to 3.3 days, so they’re down a half a day,” Gerlich said, citing Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority data. “Instead of being your second show or your third show (to see), they (Cirque and MGM Grand) want to know, how does ‘Ka’ become the one show that people go to?”

Survey results will help MGM Grand and Cirque position “Ka,” a $180-million production, to compete with shows, nightclubs and cirques like ‘Zumanity’ a production described as “part burlesque and part cabaret,” across the Las Vegas Strip at the New York-New York Hotel and Casino, LaFontaine said.

“There’s always something we need to do to get the message to the right person,” he said. “We wanted to learn more about the Las Vegas visitors.”

The WT team conducted on-the-street surveys at various points on the Strip and exit polls when “Ka” shows ended, SIFE Co-President Manny Garcia said.

“It turned out very well,” he said. “It’s insane the amount of tourists that go through there (Las Vegas).”

Garcia also handled all the interviews with Spanish-speaking tourists.

“You have people from New York to California to Washington to Florida — all over the world really,” he said.

One factor evident from the survey respondents was how awareness of “Ka” changed block-by-block, Garcia and Gerlich said.

“You get a mile away from the hotel, and there’s fewer signs. There’s a rather sizable decrease in awareness just a mile up the strip,” Gerlich said.

Exit interviews asked participants how they heard about “Ka,” why they chose to buy tickets and their impressions, among other details, he said.

“We weren’t gauging awareness there, so much as how likely they are to recommend it,” Gerlich said.

The team hit Vegas with mobile ability. Rather than pens and clipboards, they were wielding iPads with polling software and mobile Wi-Fi access.

The technology helped enhance team’s professional appearance, saved survey printing costs and allowed some realtime and next-day statistical reviews, long before the formal results presentations, LaFontaine said.

The gig was not WT’s first foray into Las Vegas market research. A couple of years ago, Browning saw celebrity impressionist Terry Fator at The Mirage Las Vegas and approached the hotel LaFontaine, marketing director for Fator’s show at the time, with questions about marketing and advertising in the city, Gerlich said.

A working relationship ensued after Gerlich, Westermann and Browning made a presentation that resulted in marketing and research assignments for them and students, LaFontaine said.

“I got to talking to Nick and Leigh and Lori, and their capabilities and their passion was what really opened the door and allowed us to work together,” LaFontaine said, adding that he expects the relationship to continue.

“We had seven students out in October. It was a great group of kids, and they did an amazing job,” LaFontaine said. “I know for certain we’re going to be doing business with them for years to come.”