Students a sweet, low-cost way to boost bakery’s online presence

By: Jennifer Heldt Powell

Finale Desserterie and Bakery had a Twitter account and a Facebook page, but the purveyor of tasty treats rarely tweeted and the Facebook page was the wrong kind.

Executives knew they needed to know more about social media, but they were busy running the business and trying to keep costs down. The company turned to students enrolled in a social media class at Bentley University. The students took Finale on as a “client” and developed a social media plan.

“As a small business, you only have so many resources, so the class was a way to learn more and to do it on the cheap,” said Chris Kane, vice president of operations for the Encore Hospitality Group that owns Finale.

The insights the students gave were invaluable, he said. The company now has a person who dedicates a chunk of her week to increasing the company’s online presence. Kane expects it to pay off as social media-savvy students return to college this fall.

As Kane discovered, local colleges and universities can be a great resource for small businesses and entrepreneurs looking for business plans, marketing advice or help with thinking through expansion plans. They are filled with students who want hands-on experiences and often entire classes are based around giving students an opportunity to try out what they’re learning.

“I don’t have a text book,” said Mari Anne Snow, who runs Bentley’s social media class. “I’m interested in what’s happening right now in the marketplace.”
At Boston College, Greg Stoller, has his students working with early stage entrepreneurs and start-ups. Students are matched with real businesses for which they develop a business plan that they present at the end of the semester.

“There are some talented people who have a great idea, but they don’t have the know-how or the time to develop a business plan,” he said.

It’s useful for the students to work on real-world plans.

The questions the students asked, along with the business plan they put together, helped Eric Chow move ahead on his idea for a fitness tracking Web site. It’s still in the planning stages, but he said he’s closer to launch having worked with students.

“Ever since the class, I’ve been more motivated to get going,” Chow said. “It reinforced to me that this is a good idea.”

A different Boston College class has students work on exploring opportunities or solving problems.

Free advice, even from inexperienced students, is in high demand. Babson College typically gets almost twice as many requests as slots available, said Mark Biddle, Babson’s director of experiential learning.

Projects are chosen in part based on how appropriate they are for the classroom and how appealing they will be to students.

Entrepreneurs should expect to put in some work also, Biddle said. The time is generally well spent.

“They’re getting free advice,” he said. “They’re getting an opportunity to think about something in new ways and they get people to come into it with new insight.”