A day in the CEO’s shoes ...
Learning about business from the inside

Even more exciting is the CEO For A Day prize – and for an enthusiastic and ambitious first-year student such as Sarah, this day presented a chance to ask pointed questions about the path that lay ahead for a prospective CEO and what steps are required to achieve such success. “I’m curious about the effects of the glass ceiling on ambitious female company leaders, of the specific challenges facing women as CEOs,” explained Sarah over a working breakfast with UnISA management. “I want to get a sense of how a company works, and to see how marketing fits into their big picture.” Sarah’s curiosity was rewarded as she worked through a busy itinerary, conducting a series of interviews with business leaders who provided very frank and revealing answers to her questions.

To start her day, Sarah met with Professor Gary Griffin, Pro Vice-Chancellor of the Division of Business, and was interested to learn how the university positions itself in the business world, beyond simply co-ordinating 11,600 students and 340 academic and professional staff within the Business School. Professor Griffin presented a fluid vision of the business school continually searching for and embracing fresh business opportunities, always looking overseas to explore links and shared experiences that can benefit both the university and its students. It’s an important mindset for such a young institution – in 2012, UnISA celebrates its 21st birthday, but is already looking overseas to explore links and shared experiences that can benefit both the university and its students.

The strategic input of business alumni is something that Professor Griffin sees as crucial for the university to succeed at the highest level. “We want to engage with industry through every step of our education delivery. We are a trading nation. Asia is on our doorstep, so we have to engage to embrace our next opportunities.”

Sarah obtained a close look at how marketing within UnISA operates through having a media training session with Michele Proctor, Senior Lecturer at RMIT University, and having a short tutorial about interaction with the media held many surprises for Sarah.

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o effectively teach business, UnISA has to perform as a dynamic and successful business – notable for being progressive, innovative and creative, so that its students learn exactly what modern industry demands of graduates. UnISA’s Business School captures this by continually striving to provide ways for its best students to engage directly with businesses while in the midst of their studies – and this is what 18-year-old Sarah Bruce experienced as the first recipient of UnISA’s Win A Day As A CEO competition, conducted in late 2011.

In a competition open to high achieving first-year business and law students, Sarah, who is studying for a Bachelor of Management (Marketing) degree, impressed the selection panel with her clear focus on wanting to engage with business leaders, to explore key aspects of her marketing and media interests. Indeed, UnISA’s Business School Marketing Manager Nishi Uppal explained that the idea behind organizing the prize to link with a CEO was to give young students a peek into the top flight of the business world – and Sarah proved a perfect candidate.

Sarah has been quick to embrace several opportunities provided by UnISA, including its Global Experience program, designed to enhance a student’s degree by giving additional practical workplace knowledge and experience through an array of networking, seminar, tuition and study exchange opportunities. This initiative was started in the Business School but has since expanded across the entire university, to now include 500 students and over 30 different experiences each year.

Professor Griffin was delighted to hear of Sarah’s plans to study for part of her third year on exchange at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland – a component of her Global Experience program. “Things don’t get handed to you; you’ve got to go and get them,” Sarah explained. “It’s why I entered the CEO For A Day competition, to try to learn more.”
the organisation’s dynamic CEO, Kate Thiele. Having been in this job for two years, Kate has introduced sweeping change through the not-for-profit organisation, from reshaping its public image and corporate identity, to ushering in new buildings, infrastructure and staff, and qualifying the organisation’s core values with her staff to provide a solid platform for further growth. Her resolve leadership has helped maintain and reinforce Guide Dogs as one of the 10 most trusted brands in Australia. Kate quizzed Kate about the differences between running commercial and not-for-profit businesses (feeding Sarah’s dream of someday working with organisations such as Amnesty International or the United Nations) before asking about the “glass ceiling” limitations on women executives. Kate said she hadn’t felt it — probably a consequence of her quest for life-long learning. “It’s important to stay new and fresh, and I believe life-long learning supports that.”

Kate explained that her academic beliefs are being put into practice at Guide Dogs SA.NT, creating a dynamic and successful company structure with strong marketing principles sitting at the very core of the operation. “We’ve got to build the brand, and then live the brand within the organisation.” Kate took over the reins of Guide Dogs SA.NT at a crucial juncture in its history. Having just obtained a portion of the $55 million Edwards Bequest to numerous charities, Kate was able to rebuild the organisation’s ageing infrastructure, and revive staff motivation and purpose as a consequence. The resulting new puppy training facility, offices and Discovery Centre – the first of its type in Australia to present interactive public education about vision and hearing – was achieved due to the generosity of bequests. Kate also faced the task of changing the core message about what Guide Dogs SA.NT does as an organisation – moving beyond support for her desire to study overseas. “It’s all about taking opportunities that come to you,” said Kate. Her confidence and enthusiasm didn’t fail to make a strong impression on Sarah. “I saw the motivation in her that’s required to get ahead. I found it amazing for a CEO to show that amount of care about her organisation and staff,” said Sarah at the conclusion of her day.

“What’s required to get ahead. I found it amazing for a CEO to show that amount of care about her organisation and staff,” said Sarah at the conclusion of her day. "This is the sort of experience you don’t learn in books. It’s such a rare opportunity.” Not surprisingly, Sarah made her own impression on the business leaders she met; Kate extended the offer of a work experience placement, and Professor Griffin pledged support for her desire to study overseas. “It’s all about taking opportunities that come to you,” said Sarah, “and an incredible day like this is hopefully just the start of them.”