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From intern to manager

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It was crisis time in the marketing department at Deutsche Telekom, Europe’s largest telecommunications company. And Bill Childree, an American student who had just begun a three-month internship in the company’s marketing department in Bonn, was caught in the middle.

During the first month of his internship, Childree had worked with a three-person team to develop a one-of-a-kind initiative called Women on the Net, which provides free Internet classes for women who have little or no experience on-line. But in bringing the idea to the market, the company underestimated customer interest. When it could not initially meet customer demands, it received a barrage of protests from irate women who insisted upon their right to take part in the project.

Anticipating a period of calm after the project’s launch, two of the team leaders had gone on vacation — leaving Childree and one other colleague to handle the angry calls.

“I was shocked by the tenacity and emotion with which the German women complained,” says Childree. “Some wrote five-page faxes, and others found ways to call through to the project management deep inside company headquarters.”

What was Deutsche Telekom’s response? The company decided to call every dissatisfied customer, listen to their concerns, accept responsibility and offer a solution. Childree put in demanding, 12-hour days responding to each complainant — in German.

He says, “I think my sense of American customer service and southern hospitality helped me, and my language skills improved exponentially. I learned a lot, especially in the area of slang and insults.”

The results: The project recovered, and Childree impressed his team leader with his composure under pressure. The head of the marketing department noticed as well. Childree was asked to stay for another three months — and parlayed the opportunity into a full-time job.

Today Childree, a 1998 Furman graduate, is a marketing manager with Deutsche Telekom. He develops and manages projects to boost sales among women, particularly by increasing the number of women using the Internet. Since Deutsche Telekom launched Women on the Net two years ago, more than 70,000 German women have taken the courses, and the project has been a public relations coup for the company.

Childree’s classmates at Furman probably wouldn’t be surprised to learn that he is working in Germany. He began studying the language in sixth grade, majored in German (and music) at Furman, and participated in the study abroad program in Germany, which he describes as a “transforming” experience.

But a career in corporate marketing, especially in a foreign country, is an unlikely path for someone who never took a marketing class.

Childree’s journey toward his current job began his senior year at Furman, when he applied for a Fulbright fellowship to study in Germany. Shortly after graduation, he learned that he had been selected and would spend the next year at the University of Bonn. He quickly arranged to live with Lu and Eckart Schlemm, with whom he had roomed during his study abroad experience.

Staying with the Schlemms was ideal, Childree says: “We often had long discussions about cultural differences, religion and politics. Everything was open to discussion, and I had to learn to articulate opinions and defend or modify them — in German.”

At the University of Bonn he studied German literature, including Kafka, Nietzsche and the Viennese moderns. The university’s relaxed pace also allowed him time for an active social life — and to think about his future. Whatever the work, he decided, he wanted to remain in Germany.

When he heard that the Fulbright Commission was sponsoring an internship program, he was one of 40 applicants — and one of four accepted. Thus began his association with Deutsche Telekom.

Still, attaining permanent employment proved to be a test. He needed work and residence permits, but the process was difficult because unemployment in some parts of Germany is almost 18 percent. Furthermore, the Department of Labor requires an extensive search of the job market to confirm that no German (or qualified citizen of the European Community) can fill a position.

At the same time, Deutsche Telekom had instituted a freeze on new hiring. Plus, Childree had no formal education in marketing — and Germans are particular about matching credentials to positions. But by proving himself under fire and earning the support of his colleagues, he overcame the bureaucratic obstacles and secured a permanent position.

Childree now lives in Cologne and commutes 30 minutes to his job in Bonn. He says he misses “large, juicy rib-eye steaks, good Mexican food, family, friends, and a washing machine that completes its cycle in under two hours.” Still, he values Germany’s sense of social justice, its emphasis on Bildung (education in the largest sense of the word), its efficient and clean public transportation systems, and its concern for the environment.

Someday, he says, he may return to the States to pursue an M.B.A. degree in international business. For now, though, he isn’t ready to abandon the smell of fresh Brötchen (rolls) in the morning, or the abundant Wanderwege (hiking paths) throughout the beautiful countryside of his adopted home.

— Jane Chew

The author is professor of German at Furman.