Announcing the VCU Customer Experience Lab

In fall 2015, Jodie L. Ferguson, Ph.D., and Haeran Jae, Ph.D., associate professors of marketing, will oversee a new behavioral research lab called the Virginia Commonwealth University Customer Experience Lab to support initiatives in research, learning and community engagement across multiple areas of customer experience, including customer service, retailing, experiential marketing, consumer behavior and issues of consumer well-being.

Launching the Customer Experience Lab was possible thanks to a combined $50,000 research grant from the Kornblau Institute, the VCU Presidential Research Quest Fund and the VCU School of Business that was awarded to Ferguson to support her research project “Use of Heuristics in Consumer Judgments of Offer Fairness in Evaluating Mortgage Documents.” A portion of this research grant will provide eye-tracking equipment for the Customer Experience Lab. Ferguson will conduct her research using eye-tracking methodology to understand how consumers use visual information on mortgage documents to evaluate loan offers.

The Customer Experience Lab will feature equipment to record and track objective and subjective measures of behavior related to consumer experience. Hardware and software equipment to aid in customer experience research include computer stations, data collection and analysis software, and physiological instruments such as the eye-tracking equipment.

Initiatives of the Customer Experience Lab include advancing understanding of customer experience phenomena, assisting and encouraging applied student learning of customer experience and marketing techniques, and fostering connections between the School of Business and community partners in the areas of customer experience research and student engagement.

Contact Jodie Ferguson, Ph.D., and Haeran Jae, Ph.D., at jlferguson@vcu.edu or hjae@vcu.edu, respectively, for further questions regarding the VCU Customer Experience Lab.
Introducing
Katie Gilstrap
Marketing’s newest faculty member

The Department of Marketing is pleased to welcome its newest faculty member, Katie Gilstrap. She brings substantial professional experience in retail and commercial banking, investment services, advertising, merchandising, public relations, direct mail and tradeshow management. She took some time to talk with us about her career in and out of the classroom.

Tell us a little bit about how you initially came to the VCU School of Business and the marketing department.

I absolutely love being a member of VCU’s marketing department. I tell people all the time that, for me, being a faculty member here has been like hitting the lottery! I get to go to a job I love, work with an amazing team of colleagues, help develop students and be a part of a lifelong learning community. What’s not to love?

I have fellow professor Bob Kelley to thank for my introduction to Dr. Little! After our introductory meeting, Dr. Little invited me to become an adjunct faculty member teaching services marketing in the evening. Over time, I began teaching additional courses, and VCU really began to feel like home. I was truly thrilled to be offered a full-time position in the department.

Prior to working for VCU, you had an interesting career outside of academia. What kind of work did you do in the corporate and nonprofit sectors? Are you still involved in those arenas?

Before entering academia, I worked as a marketing analyst at Ukrop’s Super Markets and then served as an executive committee member and as the senior vice president, director of marketing for the former First Market Bank (now Union Bank). In that role, I had responsibility for developing and executing the corporate marketing strategy; building and strengthening the bank’s brand; commercial and retail product development, management and pricing; advertising and public relations; social media strategy and execution; and business analysis.

I have also been a very active member of my community, serving on boards of large and small nonprofits doing important work in our community. From Junior Achievement [of Central Richmond] to St. Andrew’s School, I have centered my volunteer efforts on causes that are important to me as a Richmonder.

You have had a great career. What advice do you have for students who are hoping to make their mark in the business world and specifically in the marketing profession?

My first piece of advice is to find a mentor. When I was in high school, I was lucky enough to meet Jim Ukrop, and his mentorship and guidance was a tremendous force in my career. I met with him regularly, asked him many questions about his experience and his perspective and learned more from him than I could ever say.

One of the many pieces of wisdom he shared with me along the way was to “remember that you make your own luck.” And while I am still a believer in the power of a little good fortune, I do believe that hard work will get you everywhere. Everyone will show up, but thinking hard and making a real and meaningful contribution is what will make you a success.

It is easy to go to work, check things off a list and go home. It is challenging to think about how to make a real difference in the lives of your customers and to actually have the discipline and patience to do it.

I also think that following your passion and being open to new opportunities can really transform your life. Teaching was that for me. I was awarded my marketing job because my hard work was recognized, and that has enabled me to do everything I am doing now; I took an unexpected turn into academics by being open to a new opportunity that at the time seemed a bit scary. But even though it was a big change, full of uncertainty and unknowns, I jumped in and applied those same work ethic principles to my new career. And I can say confidently that joining VCU has been the very best decision I ever could have made.

So my advice is to work hard, contribute, trust yourself and stay open to the bends in the road. You could end up somewhere really amazing if you do.

Read the entire interview and see past Faculty Spotlights on our website at go.vcu.edu/mktg-facspotlight.
John Comstock, Class of 2004

Since earning his Bachelor of Science in Marketing from the VCU School of Business in December 2004, John Comstock’s career has included positions in account management, marketing management and sales management with Fortune 100 company UPS. “I started my career while participating in an internship program through the VCU School of Business at McKesson Medical-Surgical and gained valuable insight to corporate sales and marketing,” he says.

Comstock became a sales representative at UPS in April 2005. It was a good fit. “I was able to meet entrepreneurs all over the Richmond area in their homes and businesses, and listen to their goals,” he says. “This was when I decided UPS was an excellent place for me because I’d be able to facilitate global commerce for the smallest businesses. It was amazing to watch customers grow from a garage into 100,000-square-foot warehouses.” In October 2005, he moved into an account executive position with UPS. Two years later, he became a senior account executive and managed a UPS account base worth $9.5 million, working with large companies such as Geico, Dynamic Brands and Evergreen Enterprises.

From 2012-15, Comstock worked for UPS as small business marketing manager for the mid-Atlantic and customer profitability manager. In March 2015, he became area sales manager for Richmond, where he is responsible for an account base of more than $44 million of middle-market customers — usually in the $0-$300,000 range of supply chain spending.

“I really do love UPS and what we do. We are an incredibly ethical company with unmatched supply chain solutions. We enter every negotiation with integrity, and that is important to me. I love my new role as area sales manager, because I get to work with salespeople in a coaching and mentoring role while helping them grow our business,” says Comstock.

Meredith Rawls, Class of 2015

Brand analyst, Altria

Tell us a little bit about what you do for Altria.

What is your job title, and what is a typical day like?

My job title at Altria is brand analyst within the brand management department. I currently work for Altria’s operating company NuMark, which is focused on developing new and innovative products. My role is to manage new projects and products that the company is developing, including working with engineers to ensure that the product is made with the highest standards, working with researchers to make sure that it’s favorable to consumers, working with packaging services and also working with our advertising agency.

My job is so much fun because I get to work with so many different people and get to develop products that will eventually be put into market.

In what ways did your marketing classes and related experiences prepare you for what you are doing professionally now?

Obviously all of the basic marketing concepts, like the four P’s, are extremely important to learn about, but I think that the most useful things that I learned in my marketing classes were much broader lessons. Learning to market and brand myself was something that helped me to get the job that I have now. Understanding how to critically think about problems and come up with creative solutions was also a great lesson that has helped me in my work.

What are your long-term career goals?

I really hope to excel at Altria. I don’t know exactly where my career will lead me, but I would love to be a brand manager at Altria in the future.

Read more at go.vcu.edu/mktg-alumni.
VCU Sales Management Forum

Friday, Oct. 9, 2015, Noon-2:30 p.m.
Raising the Bar: Reinventing Your Firm’s Customer Value Proposition

Thought-starter:
John Perkins, VP of Global Systems, WestRock

The first in a series of related, interactive discussions, this session focuses on how your sales team can deliberately create value in each selling situation. How can it distinguish your products and services to drive value in all selling interactions? How can we help our customers move past the “lowest price” mentality and toward building long-term relationships for more profitable results?

UPCOMING FORUM PROGRAMS

Friday, Feb. 12, 2016, Noon-2:30 p.m.
Driving Change Today: Diversity and Inclusion as a Selling Strategy

Friday, April 8, 2016, Noon-2:30 p.m.
Adapting to the New Rules: Developing Sales Leaders’ Skill Sets

VCU Marketing Roundtable

Friday, Oct. 30, 2015, 11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.
Communicating to Your Target Market(s)

Thought-starter:
Chet Wade, VP for Corporate Communications, Dominion

How do you get your message to all of your markets and/or customer groups? Everything that you do communicates, so how do you ensure alignment and consistency of message? How do PR and marketing blend in your firm? What won’t you do, and what’s the tipping point?

UPCOMING ROUNDTABLE PROGRAMS

Friday, Feb. 26, 2016, 11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.
What Works? Measurement and Metric Tools

Friday, May 13, 2016, 11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m.
The Marketing Revolution: Getting Closer to the Customer

For more information contact Michael Little, Ph.D., at (804) 828-3190 or email mwlittle@vcu.edu.