

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Game Teaches Business Skills By the Scoop

By Andrea Chipman

669 words

4 April 2007

The Wall Street Journal

J

B4B

English

(Copyright (c) 2007, Dow Jones & Company, Inc.)

The temperature is pushing 104 degrees Fahrenheit on the streets of Milan, and in front of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, a small ice-cream stand is fielding a stream of customers.

For several days now, the stand's manager has been reviewing the variables that will allow him not only to stay in the black but also to expand his business: Surveys say mixtures with extra eggs create a more appealing flavor. Should he change his ice-cream mixture? At least five potential customers have walked away because of long lines. Should he hire more staff?

The scenario is familiar to any small entrepreneur. The big difference here: This is a virtual business, part of the educational game Ice Cream Empire, which Milan's Bocconi University started last May as one of the latest efforts to try to teach young people business concepts on their own territory.

Bocconi initially geared its ICE game toward European high-school students, hoping to introduce basic economic concepts and to promote the brand of the university, which has a globally ranked business school. As it turns out, the game has gained global converts from teens to middle-age managers.

Stefano Callegari, an 18-year-old Italian high-school student, says Ice Cream Empire is useful both as added background for his school economics courses and as preparation for what he hopes will be a career in business. "I think it helps to teach us how to manage all the possible situations -- money, stock and which kinds of choices work better," he says.

ICE has nearly 15,000 players, of whom 35% come from outside Italy and represent 186 countries. Beyond the teens, roughly one-third of players are university students, and another third are professionals, says Fausto Pasotti, marketing manager at Bocconi.

The game, which runs on Java-platform mobile phones, was created in partnership with software company Impressionware of Turin. Players can download it free via a Bocconi Web site that sends a text link to their mobile phones.

Simulation games such as ICE are increasingly popular in both undergraduate economics programs and in M.B.A. programs, according to business-school professors. "I'm a big fan of these simulation games," says Jaideep Prabhu, professor of marketing at Imperial College's Tanaka Business School in London. "It's a great way to learn **by** doing."

He notes that ICE uses some of the same teaching tools as two computer-based market-strategy games, Markstrat and Industrat, that were developed years ago **by** professors at Insead, which has campuses in Fontainebleau, France, and Singapore. The Insead games are used **by** a number of international M.B.A. programs, pitting teams of students against one another.

Rob Moon, a senior lecturer in enterprise and entrepreneurship at the business school of the University of Derby in England, thinks games can be particularly useful for teaching undergraduates. "There's so much social interference with the students," he says. "If we can encroach on something that's very valuable in their life" to get them thinking more about schoolwork, that is an accomplishment, he says.

Bocconi isn't the first organization to see links between virtual education and brand recognition. For nearly six years, French cosmetics giant L'Oreal SA has run e-strat, an online business-strategy competition aimed at teams of M.B.A. students from business schools.

Players start the ICE game on the first day of business and are instantly confronted with decisions: Which of several potential Milan locations should they choose? What should the mix of ingredients be? Is investment in additional equipment, such as a fast ice-cream mixer, warranted?

"The game is really interesting because they found a way of putting together all the basic economic and financial functions of a company in one simulation," says Iurie Vlasov, a Russian graduate of Bocconi who works for a financial consultancy in Milan.

[License this article from Dow Jones Reprint Service](#)

Document J000000020070404e3440000g