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MBA INSIDER: A DAY IN THE LIFE

Greetings from Cleveland

An MBA led this former card shop employee to an executive position with American Greetings, working to come up with cards that will please Wal-Mart shoppers

I develop and execute the marketing strategies for holiday-themed greeting cards at American Greetings ([AM](#)), specifically for Wal-Mart ([WMT](#)), in Cleveland. My main goal is to increase profit via distribution growth. The conception-to-sell-through process involves working closely with various teams, including creative, forecasting, logistics, and sales.

My passion for consumer goods began in high school, where a part-time job evolved into a five-year commitment managing a branch of card and gift stores. By the time I graduated from DePaul University, I had retail and promotions experience. During the next six years in product management, including a tenure with Rand McNally, I co-developed programs for Wal-Mart and learned what the world's biggest retailer demands from its vendors. While at Rand, I had a series of bosses with MBAs, whose leadership abilities and support of my professional growth led me to graduate school.

A quest for a deeper financial and strategic understanding of the marketplace is what brought me to the [William E. Simon Graduate School of Business](#) at the University of Rochester, where I had dual concentrations in marketing and competitive and organizational strategy. The MBA education taught me to think at a macro level, solve problems, and negotiate with people and teams.

It also gave me the tools to succeed and opened the door at American Greetings. I joined the company in October, 2003. My first position was as assistant product manager for the everyday side of the business. I accepted an offer on the Wal-Mart team last summer, and the drive and camaraderie of the department is simply outstanding.

Here's an outline of my typical day:

7:30 a.m. -- I usually leave for work between 7:20 and 7:35. The commute is about 25 to 30 minutes. I like to listen to upbeat music in the car. Madonna is a no-brainer.

8:05 a.m. -- Walk into the building, then my cube, log onto the computer, turn on the lights, check voice mail. I focus on the new e-mails while eating breakfast, taking my daily nutrients, and water or juice. I also take this time to find a motivating or thoughtful quote to send to the team and to other co-workers. I then take a look at my schedule, print it out, and evaluate what meetings can be delegated and which are critical.

8:30 a.m. -- Meeting with production to see if we can expedite a shipment of some cards to Wal-Mart.

9:00 a.m. -- Have a one-on-one meeting with my program administrator, who is my right hand. We review our project lists for the week, discuss long-term goals, and address any housekeeping details, including vacations, time out of the office, training, etc.

10:00 a.m. -- Meet with creative to discuss the holiday planning process and how we will develop the Valentine's Day program. We are in the social expressions business, and each level of the development and production process needs to be completely seamless to the customer, Wal-Mart, and has to result in an enjoyable shopping experience for the consumer.

11:00 a.m. -- One-hour break between meetings. Time to catch up on e-mail, some projects, and phone calls. The days are very meeting-heavy, so any opportunity to have in-office time is huge. But business never rests, and the demands pour in -- a meeting invitation for 4 p.m., a request on the cost of goods for a certain program, verify pricing on another, read performance report of current holiday at retail, etc.

Noon -- My goal is to take 45 minutes each day to go to the cafeteria, get some food, go back to my desk, and start catching up on

the news of the day. I like to read both Foxnews.com and CNN.com to get a balanced story. I look for retail issues and see what's driving consumers to spend their dollars and why. I also look at what movies are topping the box office, which designers are signing licensing deals, and then forward the highly relevant articles to the team and synthesize the trends to develop better products.

There are so many product substitutes in the market that if I can get consumers' attention at retail and have them spend their hard-earned money on my greeting card because the product spoke to them, then I have won. It means that all the four Ps of marketing -- product, place, price, promotion -- are working. The question is how do I make my cards a part of a consumer's daily experience?

1:00 p.m. -- Meeting with the category manager of the Wal-Mart team. I am trying to figure out a way to streamline a process and the number of forms required to be filled out by various functional areas within the department.

2:00 p.m. -- Have a one-on-one with my boss. These usually take place about twice a month. I review with him details about an upcoming presentation to the Wal-Mart buyer, Valentine's Day strategies, and other current projects. We also agree to set time aside to visit various retailers. The office work is absolutely necessary for this job. But going to the stores, watching the consumers' expressions, seeing what they pick up, what they leave behind, how the racks look, and what pockets are selling is critical.

3:00 p.m. -- Meet with creative about an upcoming cross-functional team-building activity and designate responsibilities.

4:00 p.m. -- Retail signage team meets with me, so we can approve the final look of the merchandising for three holidays.

4:45 p.m. -- I'm back at my desk with no more meetings for the day. I schedule some follow-up discussions with various groups, read more e-mails, and take a look at my schedule for the following day and week.

5:30 p.m. -- Time to go home. While the official work day is over, my mind is constantly thinking about the business. When I visit any retail store or coffee shop, browse various Web sites and catalogs, I'm seeking inspiration and ideas to help drive the business.

I was at a restaurant recently and took the coaster they put under my drink. The color palette appealed to me and was consistent with the palette I saw on wrapping paper in a store in Chicago and in an ad campaign a retailer was using. Once I get home and start going through all my magazines, I get more ideas from articles, ads, or photos. With greeting cards, anything can spark an idea; my job is to execute the idea and make it profitable.

Networking is important for any career path. American Greetings is a company that is part of a global duopoly at a time when smaller firms are making a bigger footprint in the marketplace. We also manage thousands of SKUs at thousands of retail stores. As a result, the candidate who wants to be part of this unique experience needs to be focused, determined, disciplined, and knowledgeable in his or her functional area or specialty.

In greeting cards, there is little time to learn the business, so you have to be able to hit the ground running. Your résumé needs to convey a proven history of past success. Whatever career you pursue, perseverance can only help you.

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