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The PMA Foundation for Industry Talent

Global Networks, Global Perspectives and Global Talent
Discussions on the Development of Human Capital in Agribusiness¹

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Abstract

The Produce Marketing Association Foundation for Industry Talent, formed by leaders in the industry in 2005, directs resources to sustaining a vibrant global produce industry through its most valuable resource... people.

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Of the impending issues facing the global produce industry, the manpower shortage that US companies will face within the next ten years is soon to be critical. Baby Boomers have been holding onto their jobs in top, middle and lower management. But, at some point, this workforce group will be retiring. The PMA Foundation for Industry Talent was formed to prepare the industry for this imminent demographic loss through its sharp focus—attract motivated talent to enter the industry, develop talent already engaged in the industry and retain them throughout their careers.

It became clear that the most important element was getting the word out about the abundant opportunities in the industry to college level students who are thinking about careers. Since most students think only of the companies that exhibit at campus job fairs, they may not be exposed to the many companies in the produce industry that don't have college recruitment programs. Thus, PMA Foundation's signature program, Career Pathways, was designed to engage students in the fresh produce industry.

Having grown from twenty-four students from six US universities in its first year (2004) to a robust seventy-three students from twenty-one universities in 2011 (sixteen US universities and five other countries in 2011), the Career Pathways program offers students a unique experience. The program includes customized educational workshops on the produce supply chain, a "branding you" session, a career path discussion panel and more. Students have numerous opportunities to network with industry professionals and walk the exposition floor. Industry mentors, called Career Ambassadors, answer student questions, introduce them to other professionals and help them prepare for the opportunities and rewards available to them in the produce industry. Ultimately these programs have a high success rate of employing students within the produce industry—nearly 50% of Career Pathways participants are attracted to the produce industry. And, because of increasing interest from member companies, plans are in place to expand from the Pack Family Career Pathways Program and three regional programs to at least six total in 2013.

As the world gets smaller and the PMA global expansion strategy more robust, PMA, PMA Foundation, the affiliate PMA Australia/New Zealand, and the PMA representative in South Africa have collaborated on programing to address human capital challenges in Australia/New Zealand and South Africa. **Four** university students from Australia have participated in the Pack Family Career Pathways Program at PMA's Fresh Summit and students from other universities in both Australia and New Zealand are engaged in a variety of talent-related activities at the annual the Fresh Connections conference events throughout the year. Students are required to complete a comprehensive project report following their experience with the goal to increase the impact of the experience. These papers are also a tool used to select which students attend the PMA Foundation programs in the US.

PMA Foundation's programs are addressing what the PMA South Africa Country Council identified as its top concern - the lack of talent entering the field of agriculture. Since August of 2011, the PMA and PMA Foundation in South Africa have been partnering with educational institutions and leading agriculture organizations to bring awareness to students of the exciting career opportunities in agriculture through career and bursary fairs. After two such fairs with approximately 2000 students and dozens of companies involved, we know from students and prospective employers alike, that events are making a difference. In fact, University of Pretoria faculty partners credit it with an immediate increase in the number of students enrolling in ag related studies.

The experience of these two fairs yielded a few keys to success for others wanting to benefit from our experience:

- an empowered and representative committee
- a supportive university administration
- a clear focus on the target market
- "student friendly" marketing methods like social media, sms (text messaging), email, post-graduate student ambassadors, and young ag company employees as well the traditional as on-campus flyers and banners

- faculty partners committed to encouraging students to take advantage of the opportunity inclusion of young high school students

In the case of PMA Foundation's Career and Bursary Fairs in South Africa, the focus was on students who have already enrolled for BSc. but haven't made a final decision on their major. However, since employers need graduates for many job functions, those enrolled in marketing, finance, and other fields gained insight into opportunities in the ag industry.

On the industry side, it is essential for all communication with exhibitors to be clear about the target market for their outreach to ensure the exhibitors are well prepared with both handout materials and appropriate employees—the younger the staff members, the better.

Some opportunities to capture:

- Registration: it is difficult, but important to capture contact information. **An electronic registration system** would resolve the problem.
- Post-event enrollment statistics: doing so will give metrics for future marketing to students and prospective employers and allows for communicating success stories to exhibitors and the media.

PMA Foundation for Industry Talent knows it cannot rest on recruitment strategies. The development and retention of talent already in the industry starts with the first day of employment—actually, it is the last step of the recruitment process. Since a company must always keep focus on its human capital as an important corporate asset, the PMA Foundation provides educational and development opportunities to help companies begin retaining people as soon as they walk in the door.