Speakership Series Report: UO Sports Product Industry

The OEMBA Speakership Program hosted Ellen Schmidt-Devlin (Class 26) in May, 2015. Schmidt-Devlin is the director of the UO's new Sports Product Management Program.

Schmidt-Devlin shared various insights about the sports product industry and the Sports Product Management Program with the approximately 50 student and alumni attendees. The focus of her talk, however, was innovation in sports products.

She provided historical context about the inception of product innovation in the sports industry. Influential factors historically had primarily been based on human genetics and the craft of shoe making, which were also exclusive to people with ample amounts of time and money. Product innovation then became more relevant through the specialization of sports and products, and was later promoted by athletes, who began to promote sports products. These circumstances were foundational to an increase in consumer demand.

Social media platforms have amplified consumer involvement through insights from athletes and user-generated content. Innovation today is leading to greater performance, wearable technology, big data, and the evolution of innovative materials. Examples of innovation in manufacturing practices include use of 3-D printed materials, recyclable golf balls, and reduction of waste and water use. The innovation taking place in the sports industry is influencing manufacturing in the military, prosthetics, and medicine.

The question was raised of how companies will compete in this fast paced environment. Patents are critically important in the creation and protection of products. The timing and cadence of delivering new innovation to market faster is critically important. Sustainability has increased in importance with the consumers' changing expectations and education in this area. Customization and localization, such as "Made in NYC," is another trend driven by the "fast fashion" market segment.

When looking at the future of sports product innovation, Schmidt-Devlin described the opportunity that exists with 'Internet of things,' described as 'everyday objects with connectivity.' Also critical is the collaboration of efforts across the government, industry, and education segments. Examples of this were provided, including the innovation taking place in the automotive industry in Germany, establishment of research and development centers in China, and the push towards products being manufactured for military and commercial end uses in the USA. Also noted is the innovation taking place in the automotive industry at University of Michigan, and with the IT industry at Stanford University.

Schmidt-Devlin provided a glimpse into the future of the industry over the next 30 years. "Everything can change," she mentioned, as people generate change versus government-led regulations. Repurposing of products will increase product life-spans, sustainable value chain management will grow in importance, the circular economy and global consumer are

ever-increasing factors, and the development of sustainable labeling and certification will evolve as the “consumer cares” with even more influence.

Athletes will also evolve in the future with possibly more distinct classifications between the engineered versus the natural athletes. Sports will also change, which will drive changes in clothing, products, materials, equipment, venues, and players.

Indispensable to these changes is open innovation as seen by Tesla, with new materials and new events. Countries that fund sports innovation will hold market leadership positions such as Hong Kong, Singapore, China, and Japan.

We all look forward to future updates about the Masters Program in Sports Management, which launches in Fall ’15!

- Linda Keppinger, Class 27