

**CAMPUS LIFE**

# A battle of wits and grit

Four American students tell **QUAH CHIN CHIN** how they won last week's Asian Business Case Competition

**T**HEY sacrificed sleep and even studies, choosing instead to spend hours in the library, poring over business cases. And when it came to crunch time, the efforts paid off for four students from the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California.

Noah Auerhahn, Michael Cochran, Suzy Ryoo and Shaun Sakhrani won the recent Asian Business Case Competition (ABCC), beating nine other teams from universities all over the world. They were accompanied by their faculty advisor, Naomi Warren.

The ABCC required the participants to analyse a business case involving Aitken Spence Hotel Holdings Plc, a Sri Lanka-based company that operates hotels and resorts.

The students were given 40 hours to study and recommend growth strategies, with an emphasis on sustainable tourism, for the company. They then presented their cases to a panel of six judges from various Singapore companies.

Ending last Thursday, the four-day event – organised for the second year running by Business Solutions, a case-focused student club at Nanyang Technological University's (NTU) Business School – saw the participation of 10 tertiary institutions from Asia, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the US.

Armed with impressive business acumen and oratory skills, the quartet targeted India as a key growth area for Aitken Spence Hotel.

The team explained in their presentation that they picked India over other markets such as Bhutan and Thailand based on their ratings on such factors as the political stability and economy of the countries. They further expanded on their strategy and possible risks, backing it up with relevant financial figures.

"We're used to preparing for 24-hour cases; that's what we based our practice on," Shaun, 20, told BT after the results were announced at a gala dinner.

Suzy added: "We used the strategy of thinking that it was a 24-hour case, and then used the extra 16 hours to make sure that we'd covered all the bases, answered all the questions, thought about the potential ways that there might be problems in our strategy."

"We played devil's advocate at every corner and at every way that there could be a problem or risk in our strategy and how we would mitigate that risk," said the 21-year-old, who also clinched the Best Speaker award.

The team also attributed their success to thorough research and plugging the holes in their own strategy.

"One of the main lessons we gained from the competition was the importance of being extremely thorough," Noah, 21, said, adding that clarity, too, was important. "You can have one of the best ideas in the world, but if you don't present it clearly, the judges won't get it and you've lost – so that was something we'd been working on."

Still, the road to victory wasn't always smooth sailing. The sleepless nights spent preparing for the competition before their arrival in Singapore continued right up until the day of the finals.

"At around 2am, we realised that the organisation of our arguments was a little flawed, so we ended up switching around two of our three arguments completely," Michael, 21, shared.

**'We treated it like a 24-hour case, and then used the extra 16 hours to make sure that we'd covered all the bases.'**

– Suzy Ryoo, who was named Best Speaker

Shaun chimed in: "And it just made the biggest difference in terms of flow. Sometimes that happens at the last minute. It's just being able to make that change quickly, effectively."

Their teamwork came across during the question-and-answer session, where each member followed up with the comments made by another. Indeed, this was also apparent throughout the interview, where the quartet often finished each other's sentences.

"Pretty much every strategy had a piece of every one of us; it's not just someone specifically owning that part," Michael explained.

Shaun agreed: "There was no person who worked alone at any time; we always asked each other for an opinion, even if that person was completely wrong. It was just better reinforcement."



ARTHUR LEE

**Victorious:** (from left) Noah Auerhahn, faculty advisor Naomi Warren, Suzy Ryoo, Shaun Sakhrani and Michael Cochran. The team from the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California beat 9 other teams from Asia, Europe, Australia, NZ and the US