

Class sharpens sales skills for ISU students



Alison Chabalowski, right, of Normal gives her Cutco presentation to Natalie Liehr of Normal. (The Pantagraph/LORI ANN COOK-NEISLER).

By Bob Holliday

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NORMAL, IL -- Natalie Liehr picked up one of her kitchen knives and tried to cut through a thick piece of rope. It was slow going.

However, when Liehr used the knife a saleswoman seated before her provided, it was like cutting butter.

After the demonstration, the saleswoman, Alison Chabalowski, knew she had a potential sale.

It was all part of Illinois State University's Marketing 324 Advanced Sales and Negotiation. The out-of-classroom experience is intended to give students a taste of the real world through real-life sales. Some two dozen students take the class and sell Cutco cutlery.

Chabalowski, a senior from Crystal Lake, hopes to get a sales job when she graduates in May. She said her experience in the class should help.

Her teacher, Jill Attaway, a professor of marketing, said that's exactly the point. Attaway also is associate director of corporate relations and communications for the Professional Sales Institute at ISU, a partnership between the business sector and higher education.

"It provides a practical kind of experience," said Attaway.

Even though the class is in its seventh year, a new twist this semester has students donating commissions to a Chicago-based hospital charity, the Starlight Starbright Children's Foundation. The nonprofit was picked by the students, who will continue to make sales calls until April 20.

Chabalowski is fine with giving up her commission. "I'm more interested in the experience and class credits," she said.

Cutco, a New York-based cutlery manufacturer, has upped the students' commission to 30 percent from the typical 10 percent because of the charitable donations, Attaway said. She estimated about \$20,000 will be donated if students sell as much cutlery as expected.

Chabalowski, who likes the idea of helping sick children, was doing her part as she sat in Liehr's kitchen with Cutco products spread across a table.

She got right to her sales pitch.

"Have you ever heard about Cutco? They've been in business since 1949," Chabalowski said.

Details from Chabalowski about the sturdiness of Cutco products followed, as well as more cutting demonstrations.

Liehr was impressed and said she'd consider buying some of the knives for wedding gifts. A Cutco table knife costs \$28, while a cleaver is \$150.

Besides learning how to make appointments and sell and fill orders, the Cutco experience also helps develop skills in handling rejection, Attaway said. She said students make from 15 to 30 presentations and have a quota of \$2,500 in total sales.

And although Liehr didn't place an order, Chabalowski said she wasn't discouraged because Liehr liked the product and might make a purchase in the future.