



NEWS RELEASE

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Von Maur retail competition awards American Marketing Association student team at UW-Stout Polytechnic with honorable mention

Proposed store concept, Simple just Works, gives Gen Z male shoppers a space of their own

[Story Link](#)

Photos attached

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Menomonie, Wis. – One of the Midwest’s most successful department stores – [Von Maur](#) – recently recognized the [American Marketing Association](#) (AMA) and Business Sales Team student organizations at UW-Stout Polytechnic for their innovative store concept, Simple just Works.

With the goal of changing Gen Z male customer behavior, the team proposed Von Maur create a place just for them – a store where young men come first in every choice it makes, from store layout to shopping options, with easy-to-find styles at affordable prices.

For their efforts in developing Simple just Works, the AMA team earned Honorable Mention at the annual Von Maur Challenge Case Competition, Oct. 15-16, at the University of Iowa.

AMA student team members were [business administration](#) and [digital marketing technology](#) students **Gabe Cauwels**, **Hannah LaGesse**, **Gerishom Muholeza**, **Grace Riggott** and **Helena Slabber**.

The Von Maur competition invited business, marketing and retail-focused students to develop an innovative retail store concept designed to attract and engage Gen Z male consumers, ages 14 to 29,

at its Midwest department stores. They had just 16 hours to complete the challenge and present their solutions and analysis to the organization's executive leadership team.

Simple just Works

During their market research to see how Gen Z men are interacting with the retail market, the AMA team visited Von Maur and asked employees questions. They also took time to ask the company questions, including about financials.

Their demographic research on shopping behaviors showed Gen Z men research products online and on social media channels. They also search for the best deals and have low brand attachment. But without a space made for them in retail and department stores, such as Von Maur, they feel like an afterthought, and so they shop elsewhere.

The team's vision for Simple just Works offers a simple layout and design, right down to the color scheme: black, cream, warm brown and tan. Merchandise sections are clearly marked: business/casual, athletics, accessories, and shoes, with a clearance section near the cashier at the front of the store. There is a large, comfortable center with mirrors and benches, fitting rooms at the back, a "Just Try It" zone, and a mini track for testing athletic wear and shoes.

They developed a mock-up website homepage, with clear, visual shopping categories that featured the proposed partnering brands of Levi's, Nike, Bombas, New Balance, Bad Birdie and Vuori.

"The concept for Simple just Works was to make the store and website extremely easy to navigate. We wanted to make sure our customers weren't overwhelmed," said LaGessee, who has a minor in [sales and marketing](#). "We wanted shopping to be super efficient, so we also have a feature where you can pay for your things on an app and then when you leave the store, you just show your receipt."

They also proposed one-, three-, and five-year plans that included expanding locations and partnerships with more in-demand brands, and enhancements to website capabilities.

With the proposed plan, Von Maur's return on investment was an estimated 134% increase, with an initial investment of \$1.7 million for space and store construction, inventory, website development and marketing and a projected estimated increase in men's sales of \$3.96 million. The team based their findings on the store's true-to-life finances.

The team received praise from Von Maur's executive leadership team, including owner Jim Von Maur. "The students had set an exceptionally high standard for the competition," said business **Senior Lecturer Pam Vaver**, AMA advisor. "This achievement highlights the talent, professionalism, and real-world business skills of UW-Stout Polytechnic students and their ability to think critically and creatively, collaborate effectively, and deliver innovative solutions under pressure while representing the university with distinction."

In recognition of their performance, the team has been invited to compete in next year's challenge.

Von Maur, founded in 1872, was recently featured in [Forbes](#). The article "What Retailers Can Learn from Successful Department Stores" highlighted the Midwest retailer's "intentional, almost luxurious" feel, its personal service and its \$100 million renovations, curated national brands and "linger" amenities.

Last fall, Muholeza and **Gavyn Schacher** earned second place in the [AcuRite Digital Marketing Strategy Competition](#) at the AMA Regional Conference.

UW-Stout's [School of Management](#) offers 20 undergraduate and graduate degrees and certificates that build students' leadership skills in business, hospitality and technology innovation, military science, and operations and management fields.

UW-Stout Polytechnic offers more than 70 industry-aligned undergraduate and graduate degrees and 40 professional certificate programs. One of the 13 Universities of Wisconsin, UW-Stout Polytechnic is distinguished by applied learning and research, business and industry collaboration, and career-focused experiences to prepare students for success in engineering, technology, design, management and other fields.

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Photos

Simple just Works, a retail store concept, was designed by the AMA team at UW-Stout Polytechnic for the Von Maur competition.

A digital rendering of the Simple just Works storefront concept by the AMA team at UW-Stout Polytechnic.

AMA team members Gabe Cauwels, Helena Slabber, Grace Riggott, Hannah LaGesse and Gerishom Muholeza with Jim Von Maur (third from left). Photo by Pam Vaver

A digital rendering of a Gen Z male shopper at Simple just Works.