

UCT GSB teaching case study on medical technology company, Biotronik, wins top international award

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Researchers from the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB) have once again taken top honours in a prestigious international case writing competition, for a new teaching case on the challenges of remaining competitive and profitable without compromising on quality in the South African cardiac device industry.



The 28th CEEMAN & Emerald Case Writing Competition has been won by a team from the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (UCT GSB). The case study by Stephanie Barden and Professor Geoff Bick beat 62 cases from 15 countries (Colombia, Egypt, France, India, Mexico, Pakistan, Philippines, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Spain, UAE, UK, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan). This is the second year in a row that the UCT GSB has won this competition.

The case, *Biotronik: Bypassing the commodity trap of medical devices in South African healthcare*, looked at the challenges experienced by Biotronik SA, an importer and distributor of cardiac devices, of remaining competitive and profitable in the South African healthcare space, whilst maintaining their brand promise to deliver high quality, profitable, safe solutions with uncompromising service.

Barden, an MBA student at the time of working on the teaching case, said she was honoured by the award along with her supervisor and co-author, Professor Bick. “The prize was a ‘cherry on top’ of a fantastic experience writing this case on an industry that I am passionate about, with a supervisor that was as dedicated to the process as I was.”

Professor Bick, agreed, “It is a great honour to receive this award, particularly as the competition is becoming more intense. Despite the pandemic, teaching cases continue to play an important role in the business school learning experience, even in virtual classrooms.”

The UCT GSB’s new director, Dr Catherine Duggan, said that it was significant that the UCT GSB is developing world-class teaching cases about the African context of doing business. “The UCT GSB is strongly positioned and well equipped to write cutting-edge cases about the innovations, challenges, and choices that businesses make and face on the continent. It is part of our mission to drive African scholarship that helps African firms, managers and entrepreneurs understand what they are doing well – and how they can do it better – as well as to share that knowledge more widely.”

Behind this latest award-winning teaching case is the story of Biotronik SA, a wholly-owned subsidiary of family-owned cardiac and endovascular medical device company, Biotronik, founded in Germany in 1963 and headquartered in Berlin with a presence in more than 100 countries globally. Biotronik SA began operations in 2010 with 13 employees and had grown to the current staff of 42 people.

As a privately owned organisation, with manufacturing sites in Germany and Switzerland, Biotronik SA could not create a sustainable advantage by competing on price alone. Rather, by taking a position of customer-centricity – the company's purpose is to “perfectly match technology with the human body, to save lives and enhance well-being” – Biotronik SA has been able to build strong relationships with South African specialist physicians thereby building a valuable competitive advantage.

Barden notes the unique South African context in which the cardiac device market operates as key to the challenges surfaced in the case study. “In 2018, the market value of the cardiac device industry was estimated at R430m. But the projected growth in South Africa was almost zero because only 16% of the South African population subscribed to private healthcare, which supported the majority of the cardiac device market's sales. Challenges of under-resourced public healthcare, high unemployment rates, sluggish economic growth, and currency fluctuations contributed to this dismal outlook.”

CEEMAN president Professor Danica Purg said the organisation was delighted to see strong cases coming from South Africa, strengthening case writing capabilities in the region and bringing local relevance to the classroom. “Biotronik is truly a great case, with a strong teaching note and potential application beyond healthcare and beyond borders.”

The UCT GSB Case Writing Centre was established in 2016 with a joint investment from the Harvard Business School Alumni Africa Club of SA and the UCT GSB, and set out to produce and publish teaching case studies that reflect Africa and the emerging market landscape. The GSB now has a collection of 50 African teaching cases.

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