Startup Internship Program Reflection: CoClear

This past spring, I worked as a marketing intern for CoClear, a startup based in Harlem that specializes in corporate carbon accounting. Corporate carbon accounting involves looking at a company’s production data, and, using a variety of algorithms, calculating the carbon emissions associated with every stage of a product’s life cycle, from raw materials sourcing and manufacturing to distribution and even post-consumer waste treatment. These life cycle analyses (LCAs), as they are called, can be performed on every different SKU within a company (e.g., different flavors of the same size ice cream product) since different materials and sometimes even different distribution routes constitute different products and thus yield different carbon footprints.

As an Operations Research major who might be dealing with corporate supply chains in the future, I was interested in interning for CoClear because of this focus on evaluating a company’s carbon footprint at every step in its supply chain. I also liked how the company had an inherent social mission to reduce the rate of climate change by allowing companies to understand their impacts on the environment. Better yet, their life cycle analysis program can be used for running different scenarios, allowing companies to see the reduction or increase in their carbon emissions by changing some aspect of a product’s life cycle, such as sourcing ingredients from Indonesia instead of Mexico, routing products through distribution center A instead of B, reducing the packaging material from 60 to 50 square feet, etc. Oftentimes, these reductions in carbon emissions are accompanied by reductions in costs and increases in the efficiency of the supply chain, so optimizing a product’s life cycle to reduce carbon emissions is, in many ways, supply chain optimization in the traditional sense, much like I will be studying in my Operations Research courses.
I was very interested in learning about the technical details about how CoClear’s LCA algorithms and process worked, and I was happy to have been given a brief overview of the LCA process in the first few weeks. However, as a marketing intern, my initial work did not involve much learning about LCAs or anything related to corporate carbon accounting. CoClear had basically finished building and testing their product, so there wasn’t much else to be done on the technical side. Now, with the product finished, my supervisor, the CEO, wanted to get CoClear’s name out into the public, and one of the ways of doing this that she came up with was reaching out to journalists at respected publications. Since we had good algorithms for calculating carbon emissions, we could reach out to sustainability journalists at the NYTimes, The Guardian, etc. to offer number-crunching services for emissions, and my task was to find these sustainability journalists, obtain their email addresses, and eventually send them emails, along with a link to one of their articles to make the emails feel more personalized.

After completing this task, I had the opportunity to accompany my supervisor and the other two officers (it was a very small startup) to a brainstorming session with Purpose, a company that specializes in utilizing social media to create online movements for social change. They were behind a campaign called #walkthewalk during the People’s Climate March that encouraged people to take definitive action against climate change. I took notes during the session, and it was fascinating to hear of all the different ways to market sustainability to companies, not only in terms of selling points but also in terms of methods through Twitter, LinkedIn, and even through sustainable business coalitions such as We Mean Business. A marketing strategy that was present throughout the meeting and indeed my entire internship was that we needed to focus on highlighting how becoming more sustainable would benefit a business’s bottom line,
which was a marketing angle I agreed with. I quickly learned that businesses wouldn’t change their practices unless there was an economic incentive involved, and in this case, we just needed to make the economic incentives associated with sustainability clear to businesses.

My final task for the internship was to create a schedule of tweets to help build out CoClear’s Twitter profile. Each week, we would have a theme relating to climate change or sustainability, and each day, we would tweet out an article or two that related to the theme of the week. My task was to come up with these weekly themes and find articles that we could tweet out. Coming up with the themes was easy enough, but finding substantive articles for each of these themes was harder and more time-consuming than I thought it would be, especially with an increasing school workload. Being a small startup in which the work wasn’t very structured, I also found it difficult to complete the tweet schedule because I had to make decisions about what/what not to include, when to post, etc. on my own. Luckily, the culture was relaxed and flexible enough that I was able to request extensions on the tweet schedule, and eventually I made my judgment calls based on what I thought would work best for the company. My decisions paid off, as my supervisors were very pleased with the finished tweet schedule.

Coming into the internship, I thought I would be actively marketing CoClear’s services to companies through cold-calling and cold-emailing, and I thought I would be able to help CoClear gain clients. Needless to say, the internship turned out to be a bit different from what I expected, and though I wasn’t able to accomplish my goal of marketing directly to companies, I was able to accomplish and exceed my other goal of learning more about sustainability and carbon accounting by reading all of the 60+ articles I compiled for the tweet schedule. I was also able to accomplish my goal of
getting to know my supervisor and the two other officers better, as we often talked when
I came to the office, and I was able to have a sit-down chatting session with them in the
beginning of the internship. They even took us interns out to lunch at the end of our
internship as a thank-you, and we got to chat more and learn more about each other for
the last time. As for the goal I set myself to figure out what kind of work environment I
prefer, I found that I preferred a more formal work environment at an office than
working from home because I was more productive when I did work in the office. I also
discovered throughout the course of the internship that I enjoy the consulting field
(CoClear regards itself as a consultancy) and that it is important to me that the company
I work for benefits society as a whole in some way. I will miss working with Sally, Erika,
and Daniel at CoClear, as they were all very kind, smart, and personable people, and I
am very glad that I had this opportunity to learn so much and experience the startup
culture through my internship at CoClear.