Investing in the future: Design interns bring fresh ideas to exhibit firms

WRITTEN BY ANNA HUDDLESTON, ECN CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 01 2009 17:26

When Chen Li He scored an internship with Derse, a face-to-face marketing company, he already had experience working for architectural firms and had just completed a graduate program in exhibition design at the Fashion Institute of Technology. He could work with 3DMax software and had collected a solid portfolio of school projects, but his real passion was in creating great environments. So, on his first day at the Milwaukee-based firm, when the creative director told him to "get paper dirty" and sketch out his ideas, Chen felt like he was part of a creative team and couldn’t have been more excited. It didn’t hurt anything that the project was for Boeing.

"My manager gave me some general directions and gave me a chance to think about it and express my own ideas," Chen said. "We were working on coming up with the best design possible and the experience was very valuable."

Young professionals graduating from college this spring are facing one of the toughest markets in years and they know it. Employers are expected to hire 22 percent fewer graduates than last spring, according to a survey from the National Association of Colleges and Employers. However, there also is a silver lining for both students and exhibit firms, which are likely to be going through difficult times. There is some excellent talent up for grabs. And as a company taking an intern, you can test a relationship before long-term commitments, bring in fresh ideas and perspectives at a fraction of the price and, of course, have the satisfaction of getting a young designer excited about the industry. Yes, there might be some initial hand-holding involved, but when isn’t there?

"Students coming out of school these days are pretty well-rounded and they also understand the marketing side of the equation," said Adam Beckett, president of Derse and head of the University Affiliation Programs for Exhibit Designers and Producers Association (EDPA). The organization has an active internship program with Fashion Institute of Technology’s (FIT) graduate exhibition design program and an affiliation with Bemidji State University in Minnesota. In collaboration with Octanorm USA, Transformit and other leading companies, EDPA also holds an annual student competition with prizes including design packages from Autodesk, cash and paid internships with sponsors.

According to Beckett, due to the current design curriculum, many of the students who apply for internships have a good grasp on technology as well as understanding of storytelling and engagement. Pure creative talent is also not the last factor on the list.

"For them, it’s not so much about ‘let’s build this cool exhibit’ but about the
Finding the good match for the organization is important, and EDPA facilitates several initiatives to help companies that are both committed to hiring an intern and those on the fence explore their options. FIT hosts an open house in April, where students can present their portfolios and have some one-on-one time with potential employers. Exhibit Group/Giltspur, HB Stubbs and MC2, just to name a few, are scheduled to participate. Many of them have taken interns in the past and some have put them onboard as full-time employees afterwards.

“At FIT, many students have worked between their undergraduate and graduate work but maybe are not exactly at the same level as a designer with 10 years of experience,” Beckett said. “However, we are seeing some great talent at a reasonable compensation point.”

For students just getting their feet wet in the industry, there is a program at Bemidji State University, which is open to undergraduate students pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Design Technology degree. The participants’ internship is closely monitored by the school coordinator, who receives updates from a mentor at a host company and helps students have a rewarding experience and complete course requirements.

“‘We work with students to get them ready and also help pick the appropriate type of internship,’ said Dr. Bonnie Higgins, associate professor in the Department of Technological Studies at Bemidji State University. ‘Some just want to be there and answer phones and file papers, while others are ready to work alongside a designer.’ To receive course credit, they have to keep a journal, take photographs and at the end of the 12 weeks, submit their report for a grade. Czarnowski, Freeman and Showdown Displays are among the partner companies.

For companies that consider participating in the internship programs should plan to have students or graduates onboard for 10 to 12 weeks, working around 25 to 35 hours per week, according to Red 7 Media. Recommended compensation is in the range of $10 per hour, plus lodging expenses for out-of-state students. Whether posting an opening online or participating in an open house, it is important to give potential interns a general overview of the internship, the corporate culture and the type of clients the firm works with and also clearly state the company’s expectations of the intern.

What should be their skill level? What are they supposed to accomplish? Can they wear jeans to work? Upon arrival, it is recommended to hold an orientation focusing on the company’s standard practices as well as outlining the intern’s assignments, responsibilities and lines of authority.

“Getting good designers has always been a challenge for face-to-face marketing companies,” Beckett said. “I think the internship programs are one the EDPA’s best kept secrets.”