

PRWeek

August 28, 2006

2006 Career Guide: Mutual benefits

Lisa LaMotta - 28 Aug 2006 18:58

Internship programs continue to evolve and both sides are reaping rewards.

Get weekly news alerts on the consumer, healthcare, or technology industry. Newsletters include news round-ups, features, and jobs tailored to the particular sector.

Unlike the generations before them, Generation Me interns are not willing to be the gophers any longer. Getting coffee for the boss and making photocopies is not what comprises an internship in the eyes of the career-driven, fast-track-oriented pros of tomorrow. Today, it's just as vital for the company or firm to compete for the intern's attention as it is for the intern to pursue the job.

Expectations on both sides of the fence are higher than ever before, with interns expecting future job opportunities to come out of the experience, and employers seeing their program as a means to cut down on recruitment time later. Interns are being given more responsibility and visibility where clients are concerned; in many cases being put on projects that ultimately get presented as a pitch to clients. These symbiotic programs offer a wide variety of benefits for both the agency and the intern.

"The interns have allowed us to diversify our workforce because we can test the waters on that level," says Doug Dome, president of Dome/HK, a division of Hill & Knowlton. "And the interns, by design, are testing the water in the PR field, so we frequently are hiring people that don't come with the standard curriculum for PR. It's somebody who has an industry interest, who matches up with our needs and those of our clients, or has a category expertise."

Getting an internship at a top PR firm can be highly competitive, especially since they are often open to many different majors and people with different curriculum backgrounds. At Manning Selvage & Lee, a pool of 200 applicants was narrowed down to just eight interns for the summer program this year.

"We chose 20 applicants to come to our office for an internship challenge day," says Tara Kashanian, HR director for MS&L's New York office. "We watched them go through a writing test, a pop-culture quiz, one-on-one interviews, and a media brainstorm. From the cream of the crop, we were able to figure out which would be the perfect people. Some of these kids were really extraordinary."

Making a mark

Many of these "extraordinary" kids go on to make a real mark in the PR world, some rather quickly.

Josh Morton, PRWeek's 2005 Student of the Year and formerly an intern at Weber Shandwick, is now an AAE at WS Chicago, where he began in January. "Just getting into one of the top firms and seeing how things work from the inside, seeing if it was for me, made things easier," says Morton. "It solidified my decision to enter PR."

"Josh's focus and ability to provide 'client-ready' materials the first time around has improved dramatically since he began," says Brad Jaffe, director of WS Chicago via e-mail. "His eagerness to learn and his capacity to adapt position him to be a future leader."

Through these programs, firms get the chance to weed through the scores of students that are now studying in majors like communications, marketing, English, and PR, in the top colleges and universities across the country.

"Mainly, we get a look at the talent that's out there. It really is a 10-week interview process," says Carol Cincotta, HR director at Ketchum New York. "It really cuts down on our post-grad recruitment time."

Most of the talent will make itself known to the top firms, working with university career centers to apply to the best internship programs available and establish contacts prior to entering the working world.

Ashleigh Finnigan, an intern this summer at Brownstein & Associates and a PR major at Penn State University, pursued the firm herself and won the senior staff over. "I have a lot of responsibility. I'm only 19 and I wasn't sure if I could handle it," she says. "But they pushed me. Now I'm more comfortable with everything."

Even with interns seeking them out, it is the firms' responsibility to make sure they have a diverse group of interns working for them. In this aspect, internship programs such as Ketchum's stand out. As a means of getting the best people from all major communications disciplines and guaranteeing a diverse pool of applicants, Ketchum has partnered with the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA). This partnership is unique within the PR world and opens the field to candidates that may have not considered a PR career as an option.

"We reached out and partnered with the people who run the Multicultural Advertising Internship Program (MAIP), [a part of AAAA]," says Cincotta. "Because the AAAA has been around for so long, the MAIP program has become truly established. [But it] always targets advertising students. So this is our entrée into getting those students to consider a career in PR - and they happen to be diverse students."

The right fit for both sides

Finding the right fit within a program is just as important for the intern as it is for the organization. When both sides are happy, the intern and the firm stand to benefit. For the firm, it makes every difference if the candidates are enthusiastic and looking to gain a deeper knowledge of the PR discipline, while the interns establish key contacts in the industry and gain invaluable real-life experience in the professional world.

"What I have found over the years to be probably the greatest benefit of having a commitment to an internship program and truly integrating it into your talent strategy, is that the interns bring a vitality that expresses itself in a lot of different ways," says Dome of his interns. "It expresses itself in creativity, in energy, in purity of thought, purity of emotion, and purity of perception and perspective."

More than just a cup of coffee

With almost every firm and PR department offering internship programs, it's hard to pick the best one. Some rise above the pack due to the unique attributes they present interns. *PRWeek* looks at a few such offerings.

University of California, San Diego

The school offers students a chance to experience PR from the academic side with an internship in its external relations division. This year-long program has interns working as full-time staffers in the areas of

fundraising, government, alumni relations, and university communications; each with a different supervisor overseeing them.

Each student is partnered with a mentor who offers a broad background of expertise. Mentors serve as a constant through the program, helping tie together the different rotations and give context to the field of external relations as a whole.

TBC PR

This year, TBC PR offered one of its interns a seat at the table for the World Series of Poker in Las Vegas, working with TBC client Harrah's Entertainment. One lucky intern has spent the summer assisting strategic planning sessions for the event, as well as engaging thousands of reporters from around the world for all kinds of media opportunities, working with celebrities, and getting on-the-job event-planning training.

Stevens/FKM

The Houston-based agency has taken on a team of 16 interns who have spent the summer in an Apprentice-style setting working in the creative, PR, and media departments of the firm. The group was tasked with running its own agency and documenting every moment via weekly video podcasts, blogs, and a Web site - web.mac.com/fastlanefkm.

Octagon

Octagon, the sports marketing and event arm of Interpublic Group, has created the Octagon Experience to offer a small group of interns 10 weeks to work in its divisions of athlete marketing, corporate business development, sales, research, basketball, Olympics, and track and field. As well as their divisional assignments, the interns get split into four teams to work on "Project X." At the end of the experience, the projects are presented in front of the division and a panel of judges to be rated by strict criteria.

Career Explorations

This program was started by Seth Flowerman, a Cornell sophomore, when he was just a teen. He was bitten by the PR bug early on and wanted to offer other teens with an interest in PR the opportunity to intern at companies and agencies all over New York. Career Explorations sets high-school students up with unpaid internships at a PR firm, giving them a chance to decide before they get to college if PR is right for them. The program has been so popular over its three-year tenure that it expanded to Boston this year.

Levick Strategic Communications

Levick's program provides interns with a real immersion into a high-level PR environment. Interns participate in client and media outreach from day one. They perform client work, actively contribute to media campaigns, and engage in client meetings. In addition, the firm has been an active participant in the Inside Washington Program offered at the University of Miami (Ohio). The firm's location in the heart of DC and its expertise in public affairs offer students a range of experiences during their stint.

Arment Dietrich

The Chicago-based firm keeps its interns on their toes by having them, pitch, write, research, brainstorm, and plan all in their first week. The interns have to stay sharp by keeping on top of news and trends, especially since they have to take weekly current-events quizzes. The intern who is most on top of current events is rewarded with a prize, which could be anything from a Starbucks gift card to summer hours. The

interns also have weekly news-release exercises, brushing up their writing skills by working on fictional releases. The experience culminates with a final project that the interns must present in front of clients.