

TALENT HUNT

'Speed dating' matches ad industry prospects

Few events combine mentorship and recruitment as seamlessly as advertising's Portfolio Night, KEITH MCARTHUR writes

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TORONTO -- Flipping through Jeff Cheung's advertising portfolio, Nancy Vonk stops to admire a conceptual magazine ad for the Schick Quattro razor.

This is no ordinary paper ad. Instead, it's a magazine-sized rectangle of thick carpet, with a piece missing -- shaved away, we are led to believe, by the four-blade razor.

To Ms. Vonk -- one of two creative directors at Ogilvy & Mather in Toronto -- the unusual ad suggests Mr. Cheung is a worthy prospect.

In fact, he is one of several bright lights she has discovered at Portfolio Night in Canada, an annual event at which dozens of the country's top creative directors sit down with copywriters and art directors just out of ad school.

Mentorship and recruitment are two sides of the same coin, but few industries offer events that combine them as seamlessly as Portfolio Night. It's hard to imagine the managing partners of the country's top law firms sitting down together to advise and interview the latest flock of law school graduates.

The 156 junior participants benefit by getting honest feedback about how to improve their ad portfolios -- the primary tool used for hiring in an industry that doesn't care about résumés. And the 103 creative directors get a chance to quickly meet with dozens of prospective hires.

"Nobody's there being a big philanthropist," Ms. Vonk says. "There's definitely something to be gained by the creative directors."

Mr. Cheung, 24, who graduated last month from the Ontario College of Art and Design, said he had butterflies but found it to be a great experience.

"I got to see everybody I really wanted to see. Everything just fell into place," said Mr. Cheung who is, in fact, being brought in to Ogilvy & Mather's offices by Ms. Vonk to discuss a summer internship.

The event, now in its third year, took place last Tuesday with simultaneous events in bars in Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal and Halifax. For a \$35 registration fee, each student got three 15-minute meetings with creative directors.

"Portfolio Night is like speed dating for holders of advertising portfolios and holders of advertising futures," says Jay Thompson, vice-president of ihavenaidea.org, the ad industry Web site that puts on the event.

Ms. Vonk has learned how important it is to move quickly for the agency's summer internship program.

Last year, she wanted to hire George Ault, 25, a copywriting grad from Toronto's Humber College. So did Chris Staples, co-creative director of Vancouver's Rethink Communications Inc. "We had a great little fight over him," Ms. Vonk says.

The competition was so stiff that Mr. Staples offered Mr. Ault a paid internship, even though Rethink did not traditionally pay its interns.

"The last thing you want to do is get into a bidding war over an intern," he says. "In George's case, we paid him because we were worried somebody else would pay him."

Mr. Ault says Portfolio Night provides students with an opportunity to have their books evaluated by the industry's top names. At the end of the summer internship, he spent a few weeks on a paid internship at Ogilvy & Mather. He now works full-time at Toronto agency Grip Ltd.

Ignacio Oreamuno, founder and owner of ihaveanidea.org, says Portfolio Night was initially intended as a vehicle for aspiring copywriters and art directors to get advice on how to improve their portfolios, but is now viewed equally as a recruitment tool.

Some creative directors even wait for Portfolio Night before making hiring decisions for internships.

Tony Miller, creative director at Toronto's Sharpe Blackmore Euro RSCG, has hired more than one prospect out of Portfolio Night.

"It's a great way to see young talent and hire someone you might not otherwise have seen." Mr. Oreamuno is already working at plans for next year's Portfolio Night, which he plans to expand into the United States. He says the evening provides students unparalleled feedback.

"The three or four hours that they're there ends up being more educational than the year or two they're in school," Mr. Oreamuno says.

"At the end, they've got some really honest feedback about where they are."

And if they're talented, they just might leave with a job offer, too.

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