RECENT GRADUATES AND EMERGING DESIGN PROFESSIONALS NEED TO USE A SAVVY MIX OF MARKETING, PERSONAL BRANDING, RESEARCH AND NETWORKING TO GET NOTICED IN TODAY’S TOUGH JOB CLIMATE.

BY SARA ROBERTSON
the days of mass mailing résumés and cold-calling firms in search of jobs are long over. In this rough and tumble economic climate, emerging design professionals have to be more creative than ever in pitching themselves to potential employers. They must create and market their personal brand, while proving they’ll make a unique contribution, be an original thinker, and yet are still eager to learn.

This might seem like an overwhelming task, considering there are fewer jobs these days and even more competition, but when viewed the right way, the economic downturn can be seen as an opportunity.

“If nothing else, we need to view this time as a roller coaster,” says Tom Williams, Partner at Carmel, Calif.-based firm Hale-Williams Interior Design and co-author of *Starting Your Career in Interior Design*. “We are beginning another climb up right now. What a great time to get into the business.”

Recent graduates are able to adapt far more easily than those who have experienced past downturns, Williams says. “They will be willing to try things that other designers won’t.”

And he’s not alone in his opinion. David Bassett-Parkins, CEO of Ava Living, a social networking site designed exclusively for interior designers, believes there is no time like the present for emerging designers. “It’s a very exciting time to be graduating,” he says. “The whole world has opened up, what used to be a local business is now global. For young designers graduating today, there are whole new opportunities that didn’t even exist two or three years ago.”

DIVING IN

So where to begin? Emerging design professionals should start with the basics by doing in-depth research on the firms they’re interested in. “The biggest and most annoying mistake I see is when people come to me with a résumé or for an interview and
don’t know anything about my company or what I do,” says Gail Doby, ASID, a designer and Chief Vision Officer for Design Success University, a Web site dedicated to teaching practical design business and marketing skills.

“You should treat looking for a job like a full-time job,” she says. “Do your homework. Be prepared and practice your interview skills. Also, be sure to understand and know the firms you are looking into.”

A clean résumé isn’t enough to get an emerging design professional noticed. “Whatever you do, don’t just send out résumés,” Williams says. “Actually research the company you are going to start talking to.”

And the days of the “To Whom It May Concern” letter are long gone, adds Bob Killian, an expert on personal branding and CEO of Chicago-based branding company Killian & Company. “There are so many ways now to find the people you want to speak to, and learn about them, who they are connected to and who they report to. You can gather all of this information online and be equipped to make a meaningful statement just in introducing yourself.”

THE LONG HAUL
It’s equally as important to remember that a successful job search can’t just be viewed as a short-term endeavor. “You need to take a long-term approach to working for someone,” Williams says. “It’s not just ‘I need to get a job and I need to get a job today.’ You still must be selective.”

Look at a new position as both a learning vehicle as well as a job, Williams adds. “If [the position] is just going to be a job, go to another company. You should go into [your first job] with the idea that it’s continuing education.”

Don’t expect to nail the job of your dreams right off the bat. “A lot of emerging designers have a hard time realizing the bitter truth that right out of school, you won’t be doing the designing you want right away,” says Erin Weir, Strategic Vision Manager for Design Success University and a new interior designer who graduated from Colorado State University in 2004. “Learn the ropes [in your first position] and how the firm deals with situations and how the business works – then the design [work] will come to you.”

Glen Gutmacher, a recruiting expert and Vice President of Arbita Consulting & Education services agrees, “Realize that the quality of the experience matters much more than the company brand. You will learn far more in an environment where you are mentored, given gradually increasing but realistic responsibility, and enjoy the environment.”

For Michelle Carroll, a May 2009 graduate of Illinois State University, the job search has been difficult. Carroll, Associate IIDA, ASID, LEED AP, wants to work in commercial design, but she’s also open to residential. Her most important stipulation for her first job is that the firm meets the National Council for Interior Design Qualification’s standards so she can ultimately work on her own certification. “For me, it’s important to not just take any job that’s offered to me,” she says. “Even though it is tough not to have the job right out of college that you thought you would

GREEN MEANS GO

Green is where it’s at when it comes to finding job opportunities in this economy. But more specifically, green government projects are happening now and happening fast, and there’s no better time to step into the field as an emerging designer.

An especially hot trend right now is in LEED GSA (General Services Administration) projects, says Christopher Stulpin, Northeast Regional Design Consultant, The Mohawk Group. He suggests using www.greenjobsearch.org as a starting point. “Put GSA into the search, and you will find that there are some great, undiscovered opportunities available. And at the very least, it will quickly show you who is hiring and what today’s professionals need to have in their qualifications to be considered,” he says.
get, it’s important to still uphold all of your expectations and your education.”

Until she snags that dream job, she’s taking continuing education classes in design software and staying involved in networking opportunities through IIDA. Her top advice for current students is to network and get involved. “[Networking] is very important for job searching,” she says. “You’re more likely to get interviews and offers if you know the person doing the interview or if they know you’re actively involved with an organization like IIDA.”

One networking event that particularly stood out for her was Re:work, a series of day-long seminars sponsored by The Mohawk Group, IIDA, and Interior Design magazine. The seminars provide job-searching tips along with advice for designers and architects on how to improve their résumés and portfolios. “I felt it was a very valuable learning experience as well as a networking event,” she says. “Even networking with people who don’t have jobs is still a positive thing. You never know who might be able to help you out.”

**BRAND IDENTITY**

Creating a strong personal brand is one of the first steps emerging designers can take in helping themselves move to the top of the applicant pack and start marketing themselves into the future. “You’ve got to differentiate yourself. If you want that job you need to be totally above the rest of your competitors,” Doby says.

The best way to start that brand is by taking a position on something and standing up for it, Killian says. “For example, if you stand for green design, then show it through your portfolio materials, photos and illustrations and put everything on recycled paper.”

Designers should start by thinking of themselves as a marketable commodity, Killian says. He advises designers to picture their skills as an object of a commercial branding campaign. It helps to start by thinking of one adjective people would ascribe to you as you first enter a room or a meeting. Whatever fills in that blank should be a stepping-stone in establishing your brand, he says.

Your brand follows you everywhere, so emerging designers must make sure it is consistent and professional. “Everything you do speaks back to your brand,” Williams says. “You have to be aware of this when people see you. You never know who you are going to run into in public that could be a potential client – so look like the professional you are at all times.”
For Naz Saeed, Associate IIDA, her personal brand got a kick start while she was still in school at West Valley College in Saratoga, Calif. Through a portfolio design class, she was afforded an opportunity to collaborate and create her own brand logo with the help of a digital design student.

Since sustainable design is central to her interests and she ultimately wants to work in commercial healthcare, the theme had to showcase that. So she worked off of specific keywords she wanted to emulate: Clean, airy, green and sustainable.

So far, she has received a lot of positive responses. She even won IIDA’s résumé and business card contest, Student, Brand Thyself, at NeoCon 2009. “[A brand] shows the side of you that is dedicated to something, and it carries across your portfolio, résumé and business cards. It shows a personal commitment to something,” she says.

**THE NET EFFECT**

Once you have your personal brand together, you have to market it – and an effective way to do that is through social networking. “People want to get to know you before they hire you,” Bassett-Parkins says.

The best way to present yourself is by constantly working to get your name and personal brand out in your professional associations like IIDA, other allied industry associations like construction, through Web 2.0 networking tools like LinkedIn and Twitter, or by writing a blog. Wherever you are, make sure you’re speaking up and connecting your interests with potential employees or clients. “Always position yourself as an expert in a specific field in the business of Interior Design,” Williams says.

While it’s important to make sure anyone can find you, it’s also important to keep those results filtered through the lenses of prospective employers. “In all aspects of your social media presence, you must ask yourself, ‘How am I being perceived?’” Weir says. “Do you have pictures up out there of you partying? People will Google you.” She suggests choosing just one social network for personal use and restricting your privacy settings on that, and then using other networks for work like Twitter or LinkedIn.

“Social networking is built around two or three important aspects,” Bassett-Parkins says. “The head shot – your face, not an avatar – your name and your information.” That way, he says, anyone can get to know you without knowing you.

As an emerging professional, it’s best to create an inviting biography of yourself in a way that’s personal and helps people reach out to you. The more outgoing you are, the easier it is to express your unique talents even without an extensive professional portfolio.

Once you have everything together, the last thing to remember is to always be confident. “For people in their early 20s looking for a job, it’s important to have a good self-image and a sense of being able to really adapt and be flexible,” Doby says. “Always [exhibit] self-esteem – if you can’t take that to an interview it’s going to be very tough.”

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**BY THE NUMBERS**

26 The percentage of interior designers who are self-employed

19 The percentage employment levels are expected to grow for interior designers between 2006 and 2016 — faster than average for all U.S. occupations

$42,260 The median annual wage earnings for interior designers in the U.S. — last calculated in 2006

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics