

2007/02: How To Land That Internship

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Yes, your senior year in an interior design program can be grueling, but it is imperative that you secure an internship by this critical year, if not before. Obtaining an internship is one of the most important things you will do in school: it will help you meet people in your industry, give you a good idea of what specific field you want to go into, and – most importantly – possibly earn you that perfect job for the future. Even though keeping up in your classes is most likely your top priority when internship time comes around, you can usually find these sought-after positions with companies who are flexible with your academic schedule. Remember – they were there once, too.

I wouldn't recommend getting an internship with a business that gives you "the business" about your current college commitments. If they show you a hard time in the beginning, then they will probably follow that trend and not be flexible about anything. One more reason an internship is helpful: it's a good time to find a great employer.

Seek And Ye Shall Find

To find a great internship, there is some key advice to follow. I did all of these things and was offered four (yes, I said four) paid internships during my senior year of college. Obviously, it was a great position to be in because I had choices and didn't have to settle for the first thing that came my way.

• Work The Network

The first thing you need to do is network, network, network. Oh, and then network some more. You can meet people in the design field anywhere. Some great ways to start are with professional organizations: ASID (American Society of Interior Designers), IIDA (International Interior Design Association), NKBA (National Kitchen and Bath Association), NARI (National Association of the Remodeling Industry), etc.

Of course, there are many more than these [see PLiNTH & CHiNTZ's ever-evolving list of The Pros], and any of these associations have student membership offers and hold informative, entertaining events for their professional, student, and industry members. I know that it can get a little expensive when you're a student, but it's worth the investment. I was a member of all of these groups, and I happened to meet my future employer at a function thrown by IIDA. That alone was worth the fees.

• Talk The Talk

Now, I didn't just waltz through the door at these functions and meet people who offered me a job on the spot just because they liked the way I looked. I had to get over my wallflower ways, walk up, and introduce myself. If you're skittish, it's easier than it sounds. You can be the shyest person on the face of the earth, but if you just say hello to people, they will usually strike up a conversation themselves.

FYI: Others are usually just as scared as you are (or even more so) and will probably be relieved that they have someone to talk to. But if the thought of being by yourself at a function just kills you, then take some friends along and make it fun. No matter if you just say hello or you chat with someone for a while, always get a business card. This little jewel will be a great tool once the function is over. [To find out some other networking tips, see PLiNTH & CHiNTZ's "Networking A-Go-Go".]

• Learn To Be A Card Shark

After I gathered all the business cards from a function that I attended, I would take an afternoon and send a thank you note to every person who talked to me just for taking the time to be considerate. Now, I personally love it when people

take the time to handwrite notes to me – they stand out in today’s technological times. I realize that, as a student (usually working part-time), time is frequently a commodity. So if handwritten notes take you too long, at the very least send a thoughtful, thoroughly proofread, follow-up email in a timely manner.

Draw upon the things you discussed to jog their memory of your conversation. Here’s a little secret: half the time people won’t remember you, but they will pretend to anyway. Even if you get someone’s card after exchanging only a few words, still take the time to drop them a note. I scored free tickets to several show houses from people whom I spoke to for only a second. They were so impressed with the fact that I thanked them for their time that they wanted to thank me.

• Then Get Busy

When networking, always remember to take a possible internship prospect up on any offer they give you. If someone says, “You should come by the showroom,” then do it. (Call before you drop in, of course, or they may not be there.) Taking this kind of action will give you a more focused opportunity to talk one-on-one. When you encounter someone who was especially out-going and friendly to you, then email them and find out if they will be attending other upcoming events. (Take care to be friendly and confident, but don’t nag.) This way, even if they don’t have any openings at their firm, they might think to introduce you to others if you have taken the time to strike up a friendship with them.

It’s also a good strategy to simply stop by any showrooms in your area and look around. When staff members approach you, let them know that you are actively looking for an internship. If you ever walk into a showroom and the personnel are rude, take the high road, but be firm and don’t stand for it. Gently remind them that you are part of the future of the design world and should be treated with respect and consideration. Just know that if the showroom representatives are dismissive to you as a student, then there’s a good chance that they are just as nasty to many professionals. If you are fortunate enough to someday have a client who wants to drop a great deal of cash, then you can just take your business elsewhere.

• Be Indispensable

All of this networking and advice should get you a good internship. Once you’re over that hump, then there are a few things that you can do to turn the internship into an even better job. The first – and probably most important – thing to do is to offer to do everything. Be the “go to” person in the office. Always take on as many tasks as you can while still doing a good job. It will be overwhelming at first, but it will pay off when your internship is over and you (hopefully) are up for a full-time position.

If you offer to do the little jobs that no one else wants to do, then when you’re gone, your boss will recognize that they really need you. You will leave a void, and they will want you back to fill it. Also, no matter how small the job, always keep track of what you have accomplished so when review time comes, you can demonstrate why the company needs you. Even if that internship doesn’t work out, you will still have some work from the actual design field to show future employers, which is always a plus.

Think Long-Term

My wish is that this article will help interior design students to find great internships and turn them into great careers, just as I did. Though being a designer can be very stressful at times, it is probably one of the most rewarding and enjoyable careers anyone can involve him- or herself with. Interior designers have the power to shape the way people live every single day of their lives, and that’s a powerful thing.