University, Industry Group Help Forge Internet Links

ADVERTISING: MSchool program trains employees for digital campaigns.

By JOEL RUSSELL, Staff Reporter

Retire the TV dream. That was the assignment in a recent low-light module at advertising agency Deutsch LA in West Los Angeles.

But the mandate didn’t come from a major food company and the people testing away weren’t agency employees.

The assignment was for a class in a new program to train advertising workers for Silicon Beach in the digital age. The program, a partnership between Loyola Marymount University and ThinkLA, an advertising trade group in Culver City, is called mSchool, Institute for Marketing at LMU.

Jared Johnson, president of agency Ignited in El Segundo and co-president of ThinkLA, said the many new digital agencies, video game companies and Bootleg marketing firms on the Westside of Los Angeles need entry-level employees who can produce digital advertising on their first day of employment.

The mSchool was created to fill that need.

"As brand marketers, we need employees who are ahead of the curve," he said. "Los Angeles is the world capital of creativity, so we thought we could tap into that creativity and produce a better employee."

The class meets on Thursday nights, with locations split among the Loyola Marymount campus in Westchester and offices of local agencies or startups. Future sessions are scheduled at video game publisher Electronic Arts in Playa Vista and ad agency TBWA/Chiat/Day in Playa del Rey.

Andrew Babin, associate professor of marketing at Loyola Marymount, said each class featured a lecture, a creative exercise or experiment, and student presentations of the results. Also, in keeping with the job market, the curriculum has a heavy emphasis on digital skills.

"As individuals these students use social media, but they don’t know how to use it for marketing," he said. "We hope to fill the gap with graduates who can hit the ground running in social, interactive and digital-oriented jobs."

The 19 students in the class, who had to submit resumes and essays to be accepted, will receive elective credit toward a bachelor’s in business. By 2016, the program will become a two-year academic track leading to a new bachelor’s degree called media marketing. It will produce about 50 graduates a year.

Eventually, Babin hopes the program offers graduate degrees and executive education classes. ThinkLA provides the lecturers for free and LMU already has classrooms and space to smooth the students to the firms. But the school plans to raise money to bring resident professors and eventually build facilities at the Westchester campus. Babin doesn’t have an estimate for funding needs.

Cindy Burnett, director of West Coast operations at marketing consultancy Roth Associates in downtown Los Angeles, said specific agencies have tried to institute programs similar to mSchool, including 72andSunny in Venice, which launched inhouse training program 72U last year. But local schools don’t consistently send talent into the ad agencies, with the exception of the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena.

"In a market as large as Los Angeles, we could use another option," Burnett said. "It will be interesting to see how this plays out, but I think they will be successful. It’s certainly needed in this industry and in this market."

Newfangled colander

Johnson said ThinkLA chose LMU because the administration supported the idea and it offered an ideal location.

"Nearly all these advertising companies are located between the Santa Monica Mountains and Torrance, and those of us (San Diego is DFS Lawrence)," he said. "Loyola Marymount is almost at the geographical center. That makes it easy for students to come from school to work and work at these companies."

Burnett noted that local agencies compete for marketing talent with computer and consumer goods companies, and even engineering firms. He hopes programs such as mSchool can close the brain drain.

"All these companies that need creative but aren’t paying advertising talent," he said. "It’s imperative for the industry as a whole to train these people."

Babin believes mSchool has a mission as well as a skill-oriented purpose because the classes provide a chance for student learning. Babin calls it industry-based training that is not specifically oriented toward the job market but focuses on the growth of the creative industry and the needs of federal, educational and institutional sectors.

In overseeing the TV dream, one team developed a mobile app that would allow people to use their glasses to order custom meals delivered by local companies. Another team suggested the creation of a one-stop-one solar panel for buying fresh meat.

The students received a low-grade assignment one at the end of the semester. They were told to take an ordinary paper calendar, after it slightly and figure out how to sell it as a new product using both traditional marketing techniques and those of the digital age.

"If they thought they wanted a degree in marketing, but didn’t know why, this will answer that question," Babin said. "I hope this experience opens their eyes to the opportunities in marketing and advertising."