LMU's M-School trains students by directly linking them into today's ad industry

During the last decade, many of Southern California’s marketing and advertising agencies had, for the most part, stopped hiring graduates fresh out of college.

“The people coming to us with degrees didn't really have the skills and knowledge to deal with digitally powered marketing,” said Eric Johnson, president of the ad agency Ignited and thinkLA, a local organization of advertising professionals.

The problem, he explained, was that in a constantly evolving media landscape, traditional marketing courses just weren't cutting it — both a bad situation for the grads, who couldn't find jobs, and a bad situation for an industry that thrives on fresh ideas.

“We were chasing each other's employees and stealing them out from under each other, which is not really the healthiest thing,” Johnson said.

A nontraditional solution

ThinkLA partnered with Loyola Marymount University to tackle the problem. Together, the organization and the school set out to establish a new educational approach to marketing for a new generation of students and businesses.

The result, launched in 2012, is the M-School at LMU's College of Business Administration. It’s the only program of its kind in the country.

"We wanted to break with convention," Johnson said. "So the first thing we did was create a program where every class is co-taught by a working professional and every class has a very nontraditional format."

For one thing, there are no textbooks. Matt Stefl, co-director of the M-School and former head of strategy at the ad agency Dailey, explained: "If I write right now that this is what Facebook is good for, by the end of the semester it's going to be useless."

Classes at the M-School often take place outside the classroom. LMU is situated in the heart of Silicon Beach, home to marketing giants like Deutsch LA, TBWA\Chiat\Day, Google and many more. On a typical day, students might hop into vans and head out to one of those companies, where they get insights from the pros, tackle a real marketing task and create a presentation of their work.

Students must also complete a semester-long marketing campaign that culminates in a pitch to a professional audience. In keeping with LMU's key values, these projects often involve some aspect of public service.
‘Remarkable and unconventional’

One class worked with representatives from the Los Angeles mayor's office to rebrand the city and make it more desirable to investors and new businesses. Last semester, students ran an AdWords campaign, an online advertising program that places ad copy around Google search results, for six nonprofit groups. Thanks to a grant from Google, the students were able to work with a budget of $30,000 for each nonprofit.

That made the AdWords campaign a high-stakes real-world assignment, and students felt the pressure. They were overwhelmed at first — and that was by design.

"College education has been geared toward right and wrong answers. That doesn't work in modern marketing," Stefl said. "We want [students] to figure their way through it. We let them struggle and we let them be uncomfortable, which is where we feel the best learning opportunity is."

That made the M-School a perfect fit for Emily Wallace, a senior. "I'm not very conventional in my learning habits. I don't love tests or sitting in class just looking at PowerPoint," she said. "And in this program, every single thing we do in class is remarkable and unconventional."

Wallace recently completed an internship, another important aspect of the M-School experience. She worked on the Nissan account at TBWA\Chiat\Day and headed a project at ad agency Heat in San Francisco, researching ad strategies for the city's LGBT community.

The ultimate test of the M-School's success, though, is in the job market. According to Johnson, 90% of the students got jobs or internships with leading agencies in the summer of 2014. Global media company Universal McCann alone snapped up four graduates for full-time positions.

"The feedback we've gotten is that people are really thrilled with the quality of the students and their work ethic," Stefl said.

—Maxine Nunes, Brand Publishing Writer