2017

Phil Baker

Fashion Marketing Grad Guide



This time of year sees many sweaty, nervous young people trying desperately to find meaningful (and preferably full-time) as our parents and friends all harass us about the various pieces of paper we spent an ever increasing fortune on. “How much are you asking per hour?” “Can you work for yourself?” “Are there even jobs in that!?” It’s a stressful time made even more difficult with the unrealistic expectations we students have and the lack of direct help from employers on what they even want from us.

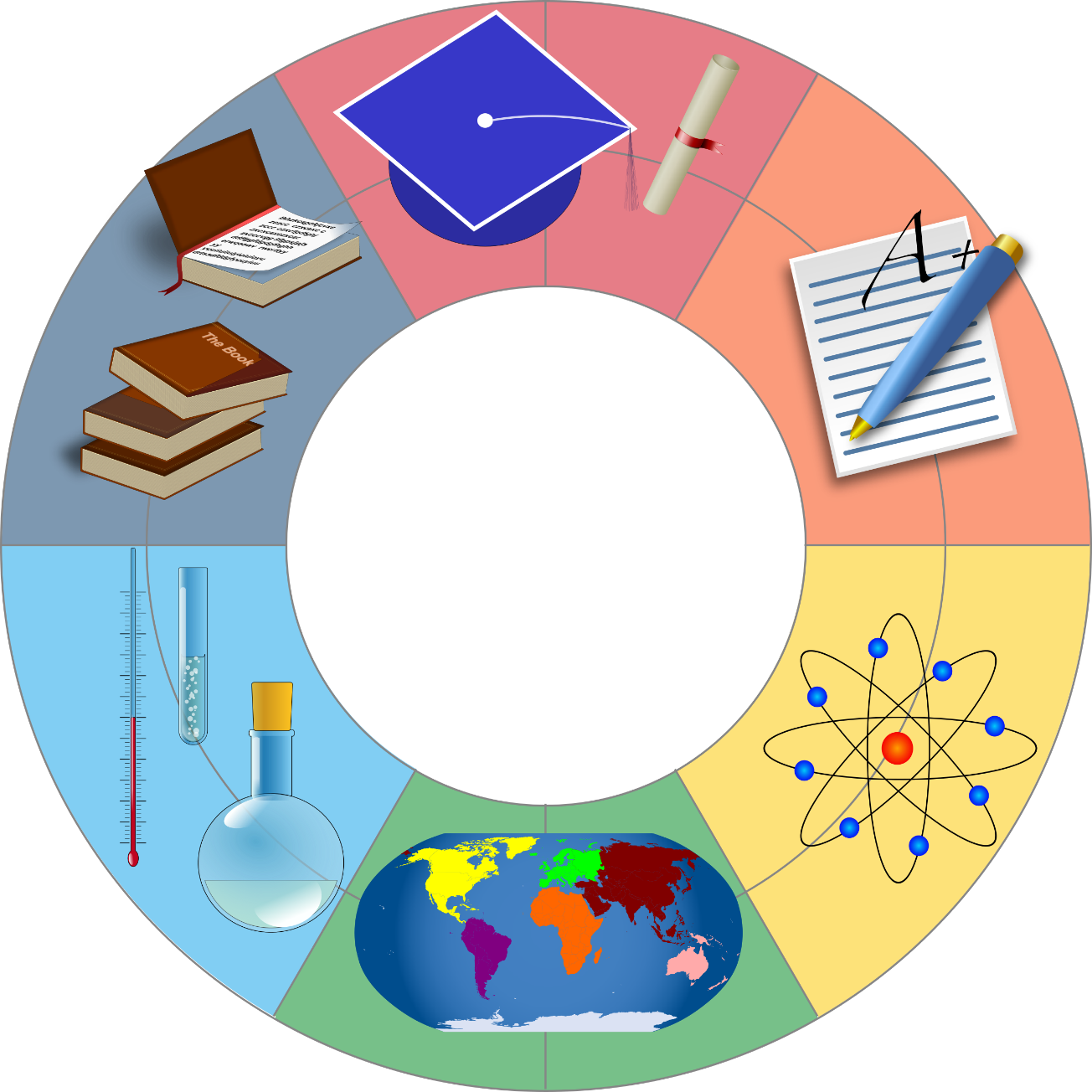


*“You mean I need experience to get experience!?”*

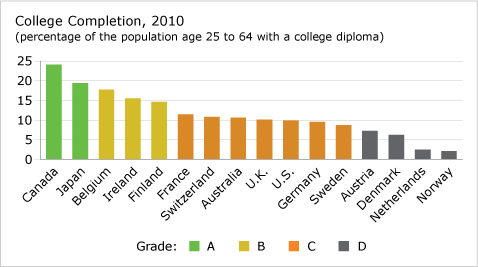
The goal of this report is to discover what grads can do to stand out in the job market by asking the employers what they look for in a candidate. Which positions are entry level? What counts in a portfolio, and what sorts of goals to set once you have the position? I’ve asked people involved with public relations and the fashion industry for answers.

**Planned Research Methods**

* Secondary research from online sources
* Primary research from employers in various fields



Fresh high-school graduates in Canada are given the expectation of future academia. From personal experience I can say that university and college are heavily favoured over trade-school or no school at all. This makes us one of the most educated countries in the world with strong retention rates.



*Courtesy of Conferenceboard.ca*

Fifty-one percent of Canadians between 25 and 54 years old possess some kind of post-secondary qualification compared to 41% in 2001[[1]](#footnote-1). This is impressive given our sagging dollar and a continual (and unsustainable) increase in tuition costs. This can be a huge hurdle for many university hopefuls and an absolute nightmare for graduates. This year the federal government wrote off $176 million dollars in student loans it deemed beyond collection. The governments writes off a loan if bankruptcy is claimed or the six year limit on collection is reached. The dollar value listed above amounts to 33,967 loans that were unable to be paid![[2]](#footnote-2) This is after the Canadian government ramped-up efforts to collect upon writing off $312 million dollars in 2012. Rising tuition rates and more aggressive collection tactics may start to dissuade future generations from seeing post-secondary educations as viable.

A high-default rate could coincide with a figure stating only 64% of graduates actually have a job that relates to their degree[[3]](#footnote-3). This number could make future students think-twice about applying for university and should be made readily available during the application process. This makes me wonder if university is pushed too much upon young people. If we work for many years and accrue thousands of dollars in debt and still have to work for minimum wage the financial and mental distress would be worse than having not got back to school at all.

Now, if you have decided to take the critical step to enter into post-secondary education, how can you best capitalize on your time there and get the leg up on your peers come graduation? Some shocking truths to start. McGraw Hill found that upon graduating, only 20% of students felt that school properly prepared them for the workforce. This is backed up by a study by the Association of American College and Universities (AACU) that found only two in five employers thought that graduates were proficiently prepared for the workforce. Students must look outside school for practical skills and placement help if they want to appeal to employers. According to Univcan, in 2014, 80%[[4]](#footnote-4) of employers saw interns as a source of talent and future employees.



*Seen here: unpaid interns*

Internships are a great way to get that valuable experience component of your education. Employers tend to look for application over memorization and proving you can solve problems is invaluable. It seems like a glaring omission then, that neither LCI Education nor the Art Institute have a dedicated internship program. At best Ai has a career services program but many graduates I have spoken to have told me it is a fairly hands-off service.

If other schools also do not offer help (other than a quick page online) then it falls largely to you to make it happen. A great way to find opportunities is to simply speak to people in the industry. I have personally received offers simply by chatting up the people working in stores I like! Don’t be afraid to approach the companies you like. You’d be surprised by how many companies actually want fresh talent! Even better, you are new and don’t have bad habits from a previous employer! Managers love that! Also decide if you’ll settle for an unpaid position or no. Sites such as Linkedin, Style9to5, and Indeed all post internships for you to find so all you have to do is use your marketing skills and find your fit!

In research and speaking with company representatives, I have found that the most important attributes you can have are spirit and brand suitability. Employers want people that work hard and share the values they have. The fact you have a degree means little when many others have the exact same thing! Adaptability, team-work, and communication are also huge assets that employers look for[[5]](#footnote-5). Some skills may be difficult to demonstrate in an interview but grads can dig deep to find examples of these skills for their resume. Leadership? Writing skills? Both might have been utilized in a previous job or internship. Attention to detail? Work hard to ensure your resume is free form spelling of grammar errors.

While employers may look for the intangibles listed above your portfolio is still your biggest display of talent and personality. Think of portfolio shows as Speed-dating. Both you and the other party have a few short moments to get down to business. Practise an “elevator pitch”. It should encompass your goal, your unique selling points (You are selling the idea of you!) and a few thoughtful questions for good measure. They’ll see many other portfolios that night so let your work be a cohesive reflection of you!



*A cohesive reflection of Anna Wintour*

Case Study 01

Kevin Wall Instructor at the Art Institute, Visual Merchandising as SIGA International and former Regional Merchandise Manager at Tommy Hilfiger

According to Kevin, there are many positions new graduates can expect to enter in their dues-paying stages. Areas such as retail, back of house, and even some assistant positions in sales as well as visual merchandising and wholesale. The variance of entry-level positions should be encouraging news to grads who can only think of retail as a start and are also horrified at the prospect. If retail is not your game you can hone in on a sales or VM job if either interest you. Retail is still the most common place to start and can branch out into management positions, sales positions, and visual merchandising.

When asked about the evaluation of new hires Kevin emphasized brand suitability and attitude above all which is hardly surprising when looking at his own career path (more on that later). He re-iterated that energy level and initiative were second only to how well the candidate fit in with the brand image and values. No goth-grads under his watch! This makes sense. If you personify the brand you inspire confidence in those around you which leads to more sales and a faster promotion.

Attitude is one thing Kevin wishes he could see from more applicants and loyalty from new hires. We started an interesting conversation about employee-loyalty versus employer-loyalty that will have to wait for another day though, he can see why new hires may feel a bit undervalued by employers these days.

Kevin was more than glad to share about his own career path which should inspire anyone looking into retail as a start in their career. Kevin spent a few years specializing his business degree while spending his summers working at the famous Harrods in London via the SWAP program. After finishing his marketing degree he attended design school and eventually moving to Vancouver on the advice from his SWAP friends there. He got a retail job at the Hudsons Bay Company (HBC) and performed splendidly. His performance was noticed by Tommy Hilfiger who felt Kevin was a perfect fit for the brand. He was asked to manage the new TH denim department and within six years was quickly promoted through the company from Provincial Manager and Western Canadian Manager, to Canadian Manager. This lasted until the economic crash which required Kevin to conduct a massive downsizing operation ending with his position. After a year traveling and relaxing with the help of a generous severance package, Kevin began looking for a new opportunity. He stumbled upon an offer for a part-time instructor at the Art Institute and within a year secured a full-time teaching position. Obviously this didn’t compare to his previous life and on-top of teaching, Kevin acts as VM for brands in the HBC Pacific Center location.

When asked about his most challenging task as a Visual Merchandiser, Kevin responded that finding shelf-space for new products that are constantly arriving was his prime headache. After shadowing him for several weeks, I am inclined to agree.

Case Study 02

Stephanie Newell

PR and Events co-ordinator for Dish+Duer

Stephanie was not afraid of giving honest answers. “I’ll give it to your straight, entry-level PR jobs are few and far between.” She replied, when asked about starter jobs in her field. She stated that media connections are a necessity but you can’t build those without a job! “Talk about a catch-22”. Her recommendation is to pursue an internship and absorb as much as possible. Once the internship is over, your best bet is to start your career at a larger agency where entry-level positions are still very specific.

When asked how she evaluates new hires, Stephanie simply asks herself “Do they make my job easier?” For portfolios, she looks for ones with personality as opposed to sterile perfection. Stephanie wishes graduates were more bold and ambitious these days.

I then asked Stephanie about chartable career paths. She reiterated that one typically starts with an internship. From there they move up to PR Coordinator. This step is all about the aforementioned media connections. Pitch the right things to the right people for an average of two years and you can start looking at PR Manager. This is the spot most of my peers think of. Revising other people’s pitches and managing budgets. Alternately, Stephanie says that one can simply start their own firm once they have a decent media list. Ideally you’d have three to five clients and charge $5,000 per month each. Not a bad figure at all!

Stephanie herself has followed this path. She worked for a small firm until graduating. She wanted to work for a small firm so she found ten she liked and sent resumes to all of them. She found her current position through an instructor she had back in school and was brought on as a PR Coordinator. She values the experience working for a small firm has given her “In the last year, my jobs has expanded to events, retail marketing, ambassador programs, photo shoots and now managing an intern. But most importantly it has allowed me to build personal connections with over 500 media contacts worldwide” Her next goal is to start her own agency within the next few years.

Currently, Stephanie considers effectively managing others to be her biggest challenge. That experience will become invaluable when she finally heads off on her own.

Case Study 03

Pete Nguyen

Art Director for Berlin Advertising

Pete is an acquaintance back in Edmonton and I have had the pleasure of watching him experiment and succeed as a band member, fashion designer/label founder, photographer and finally Art Director both at his current position and at the well-known Edmonton “Avenue Magazine”. Given his work in a multitude of creative fields I was eager to ask him about his career. “I just wanted to draw!” he exclaims. “I studied as an illustrator and designer. I didn’t know much about career paths”. He got a job designing for magazine straight out of school and showed plenty of initiative. This moved him up to Art Director. He took a job at the VUE Weekly arts newspaper and then onto Avenue Magazine where he gained even more experience as a director. Learning about leading a team and managing projects as well as budgeting, and creative problem solving. He is currently putting all this experience together at his current position.

When asked if this was average, Pete explained that the opportunities vary a lot once you enter the field proper. The most common entry-position is Production Designer. Many people find the right spot and stay in that. Others move up to become directors, partners, or owning their own firms. “Creative thinking and business are closer than ever, so the opportunities are endless.”

When evaluating candidates, Pete looks for those with the capacity, and desire to learn and grow “you shouldn’t expect an abundance of skill and experience but instead focus on the potential of the applicant”. He follows up by stating that the person should fit in with the existing culture of the agency. One, to ensure that they can get along with the company, but more importantly to make sure they will be happy and hustling every day.

Leading a team seems to be the greatest challenge of Pete’s job. Properly communicating end goals and making sure everyone has the same vision are crucial to delivering a cohesive product. He must also make sure that everyone is contributing by giving them the tools and authority so succeed. “Sometimes on a project that lasts months, it’s easy to lose interest, so keeping things interesting and worth completing is challenging but ultimately rewarding.”

Pete looks for exploration in portfolios rather than skill. “It’s hard to expect a junior designer or artist to have a solid style/approach that could take years to achieve.” Instead he would rather see a variety of work. He says one can learn a lot about someone from how they present their work. Be proud of what you do! “Also, less work is better. Put your best work forward.”

Pete likes to see designers with multiple disciplines. He would like to see more designers that can draw, and create in traditional and digital mediums. A wide creative scope he says, makes it easier to communicate ideas.

Once hired by Pete, you’ll be evaluated based on how well you integrate yourself into the culture and systems that run the agency. He hopes after 90 days you’ll be confident and capable in understanding instructions and the reasoning behind challenges.

If you find yourself in an internship Pete suggests looking at it as a matter of quality over quantity. An internship should help you find out how to identify a company’s ethics and culture. ” What you want to learn with internships is how an aspiring company works! How do they treat their employees, how they process projects etc. This way you have an idea of what to want to achieve in finding employment. I think this is more important than getting a job, or filling a role.” This is an important reminder for students who would simply rather just find a job anywhere. Find a company whose goals and values match your own if you want to succeed!

One final piece of advice? Pete says to find a company who values creativity and how intertwined it I with business. They’ll be the game-changers altering the landscape in the future. Hopefully you’re along for the ride.

Image Sources

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