Grit, tenacity and heaps of fun

An overseas internship can be the experience of a lifetime, writes EMIR SHAHRI

FIRST fell in love with advertising in one of the communications research classes conducted by Associate Professor of Corporate Communication Practice Mark Cheng. On that fateful day, Assoc Prof Cheng screened BMW Films, a Cannes Lion-winning campaign produced by one of the most creative agencies in the world, Fallon Worldwide, to introduce us to the art and the science of seeking creative solutions for business problems.

I sat there, awed by the prospect of an industry that allowed me to combine my love for telling stories with my love for solving puzzles.

With Clive Owen wreaking havoc in style in his BMW Z4 in the background, I promised myself: “One day, I’ll find myself in front of Fallon’s doors.” In the summer of 2009, I decided to make good on my promise. I was hesitant at first, as I am by no means a student with a stellar academic record. I mustered all my courage and decided to take a shot at a three-month internship opportunity with Fallon Worldwide in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

A few interviews later, coupled with a gracious word from Fallon alumna Calvin Soh, who mentored me during an earlier internship at Publicis Asia in 2008, I beat hundreds of candidates from top colleges from around the world to clinch one of 12 coveted spots in Fallon’s summer internship programme. I was assigned to the production department on the creative floor, straddling both interactive and broadcast production, under the mentorship of interactive producer (and part-time pilot) Matthew Polski.

My primary responsibilities were to assist in the production of interactive/new media campaigns, particularly for Fallon’s world-wide accounts with the National Broadcast Corporation (NBC) and the Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank (ADCB). For NBC, I helped to develop the user experience for the NBC’s Hulk account where we had proposed a Twitter campaign to extend the character SABAH (through the @S_A_R_A_H handle) into the microblogging service, allowing users to interact with the show, while extending Eureka into the digital social space.

I learnt a great deal on “wirefrapping” the social media space to identify where conversations were headed on a certain product, and found levers that we could use to enter the conversation.

I also assisted Calvin, as part of the HTC global pitch team, to come up with new media strategies to promote HTC’s new operating system, Sense (which was to debut on the HTC Hero). We looked into digital arts for new exciting ideas to present the brand in the digital space.

We brainstormed solutions that utilized cutting edge visualisations, social media livestream aggregation on interactive wall installations, as well as the use of emerging technologies, such as Microsoft Surface, in advertising, in order to highlight the quietly brilliant allure of HTC’s new operating system.

Of course, it was not just all hard work and no play in a creative agency. We had some time off to recharge, doing laps around the office on scooters, working out at the in-house gym, catching a concert by the fireplace (I got to see A Fine Frenzy while I was there), downing a pint of brewski while watching television, playing old school arcade games or a game of Mario Kart on the Nintendo Wii.

We also had the opportunity to donate our time towards a good cause at Camp Heartland, a summer camp for children affected with HIV/AIDS, where we helped to prepare the campsite for its participants.

For me, embarking on this overseas internship was the experience of a lifetime. For one thing, it taught me to adapt to the pressures of working in a culture completely different from mine. Secondly, it provided me with the opportunity to adopt what I had learnt in school to the unique problems faced by each client. For instance, what may work for NBC in New York City might not necessarily work for ADCB in Dubai.

Those who hesitate and worry that they might not be good enough to secure something like this, sometimes all it takes is a little courage and enthusiasm. At least, as the legendary adman Leo Burnett once said: “When you reach for the stars, you might not get one, but you won’t come up with a handful of mud either.”

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