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Social-media needs spur student hires

More NY firms seek the digitally savvy; help is inexpensive, but time-intensive

By **Anne Field**

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When husband-and-wife team Robard Williams and Amanda Allen founded NewlyWish.com in 2009, they needed a savvy social-media strategy to promote the online gift registry. But given their background in banking and risk management, creating such a plan wasn't their strong suit.

To find the required expertise, they made a choice that has become increasingly popular: hiring a student who knew more than they did about Facebook and similar sites.

"Students are more tuned in to social media than even people like myself with considerably more business experience," says Mr. Williams.

NewlyWish's part-time intern—who'd worked in marketing before enrolling at Fordham University Graduate School of Business—helped with tasks including devising a Facebook and Twitter strategy and creating an e-mail campaign. In exchange, she received course credit.

Business students have long been a source of low-cost help for small businesses in the city, typically receiving as little as $10 an hour, or simply school credit. But lately, area business schools have reported a sharp rise in interest from small companies that want to hire interns or consultants.

HELP WANTED

"Five years ago, I might have gotten one call every four or five weeks," says Bruce Bachenheimer, program director of entrepreneurship at Pace University's Lubin School of Business. "Now, it's more like one a week, at a minimum."

Baruch College's Zicklin School of Business and Columbia Business School have also seen significant increases in requests from small firms.

A desire to tap the expertise of digitally savvy students who've grown up with social media is driving much of the uptick in demand.

"Many internships on our website include at least some social media and marketing," says Cari Sommer, co-founder of Manhattan-based urbaninterns.com, which connects small businesses with interns, part-timers and freelancers. The number of such internships listed on her site has risen 50% in the past six months.

Relying on students instead of professional marketers—who can charge $100 an hour or more—does bring challenges. First of all, companies that set up internships may require legal help to comply with complicated labor laws.

"There's a lot of gray area," says Salvatore Gangemi, an employment law specialist with Gangemi Law Firm in Manhattan.

Furthermore, to attract the most highly sought students, firms need to find ever-more-engaging ways to advertise their gigs, and they must be prepared to offer lots of feedback.

Joan Brothers, owner of boutique real estate company Manhattan Global Properties, meets twice a week for two hours with each of her two interns. They're helping the firm gear up for a trade show in Beijing next spring by reworking its website and social-media strategy.

"It's a huge amount of time," Ms. Brothers says. "But we want to get it right."

LET'S DO LUNCHES

Chief Michael Aiken goes a step further at Spring, a six-employee Manhattan firm that generates seven-figure sales by providing business marketing services to musicians. He meets individually with his intern and arranges opportunities like lunches with social-media experts.

"You can't just sit them down and tell them to get to work and leave it at that," says Mr. Aiken.

Natalie Rogers has found a way around the supervision quandary. A self-described "bad marketer" who runs Talk Power—a Manhattan-based consultancy that helps professionals conquer public-speaking phobias—she recently signed on with a social-media class at Fordham. At semester's end, teams of students will present her with proposals for a marketing plan. She and the professor will choose the best.

"I think this will put me on the map," says Ms. Rogers, whose firm now chalks up some $100,000 in sales.

At least, it could put her on Facebook—without a hefty price tag.