

Green and Lean? Or Just Lean?

by Tisha Carper Long

Tisha Carper Long is still in school and as of this writing is unemployed. She's trying to follow her own advice. She may be contacted at tishacl@gmail.com

Ouch!

Let's face it, it's difficult to find jobs in exhibitions these days, especially for new graduates with little or no job experience. At this writing, unemployment figures in the U.S. are at record highs, and we're all rediscovering that when the economy goes south, cultural institutions are among the first to suffer. So while this issue of the *Exhibitionist* focuses on making our exhibits "leaner and greener," our Exhibition Studies column will look just at the lean side of things—specifically, how the job market is affecting recent graduates of museum studies programs.

Our students and grads are finding jobs, although not as quickly as in the past.

—Museum Studies professor

My impression was that this was one of the best programs in the country, so I believed it would be easy to get a job after graduation. Boy was I wrong.

—2007 graduate from the same university

Even without a recession, notes JFKU Museum Studies Professor Susan Spero, "The most difficult positions are in exhibition development. I have always been clear [with students] about the requirements for that work, the flexibility needed to get there, and the skills to land a beginning job.... People who are designers and in interpretation are always struggling; even those with other Master's [degrees]." Nevertheless, even today, jobs are available, and some exhibition studies graduates are finding those jobs. How will you become one of them?

There's no question that it's frustrating. In

preparing this article, I sent out e-mails to the NAME listserve and student social networks asking for new-grad feedback on the job market. I was surprised by the vehemence of some of the responses. "The job hunt is ridiculous," fumed one grad. "Disastrous" was a term used by another. Behind that vitriol is a real fear that after two or more years of dedicated study, accumulated debt, and deferred careers and personal lives, a person could find their hopes and dreams in shambles. So, to deflect the fear, let's look at the challenges that students are facing. Are these career challenges peculiar to our profession? Are they different than in the past, and if so, how should we adjust?

In every field, new graduates face the fundamental challenge of insufficient job experience. Internships are not always enough to bridge the gap. A graduate writes, "The problem I am finding is my Master's degree does not get me anywhere without previous museum experience, which I don't have since I completed my education in one stretch.... I wish more museums were willing to take on new professionals."

Today's museum employment market is uniquely difficult due to the loss of endowment, membership, and ticket incomes, resulting in layoffs and hiring freezes throughout the field. Many positions that were offered in the summer or early fall of 2007 have abruptly vanished. "One position I interviewed for was actually rescinded.... Many of the museums [in my city] are undergoing hiring freezes," notes a dismayed grad.

So—what are we to do?

There are positive steps that you can take if

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you’re unemployed right now. Not all of these suggestions will apply to every out-of-work graduate, and some are geared more closely to collections people or educators. Nevertheless, they offer a “portable” wisdom that may help new graduates get by until the economic outlook improves. Here are a few starters:

1) Don’t take it personally.

Exhibition development is a difficult field to break into, and times really are tough. So if you can’t find a job, remember that it’s not because you (or your educational institution) are inadequate! Stellar grads from the top programs in the nation are struggling, too.

The problem is not personal, but the solution can be. You are not a statistic, nor are you an automaton regurgitated by an educational factory. You have a unique set of talents to offer. Look closely not only at your skill set, but also at the activities that you enjoy taking part in even when you’re not getting paid. Those are your gifts to your prospective employer. Keep them in mind as you construct your resume and write your cover letters.

Keeping your individual gifts and strengths up-front can help to keep discouragement at bay—a critical factor in presenting yourself to the world. “It might be the worst time to be looking for a job right now,” writes 2008 grad Katie Williams, “but I am trying to stay positive and know that something will turn up.”

2) Be flexible.

Sean Hooley, who entered graduate school following a career in aquariums, spent two years finding the career he wanted after earning his Master’s. He took a flexible approach: “After graduating [in 2006], I looked at

a handful of cities that I wanted to live in (Chicago, NY, Boston, Philadelphia) and looked for museum jobs there. Not getting any offers, I ended up doing work similar to that of a museum content developer in an interactive design firm. While a great experience, I missed museum work and continued searching, finally leaving the company to devote more time to looking, while I worked part time doing tech support for a nonprofit.”

Not everyone is in a position to move to a new city, but it’s worth thinking about. Consider the trade-off of staying on after graduation in your school’s city, versus finding a new town to live in. Staying on may mean more word-of-mouth job contacts, but you’ll also find a glut of other graduates—your former classmates—who are just as hungry as you are. If you do move, consider that smaller towns have smaller institutions, and small museums are less likely to be able to support a full-time exhibitions developer. Unless you enjoy a broader range of duties, or are able to supplement your income with freelance work, you’ll probably be more successful in large cities.

Sean was also willing to look beyond the strict confines of museums themselves. Many museums outsource their exhibition development to design firms, so be sure to explore that option. You may not want to stay at a firm your whole career, but it could be just the right environment after all. One recent grad who is hiring at a museum noted that while museums may freeze hiring for permanent positions, “Contract work is still pretty steady....We have to do more with less, so that means each person I hire has to be multitasking, highly motivated, dedicated, and love what they are doing.” Remember that

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all potential supervisors want to see a rich and varied folio of your design work, so market yourself wisely and honestly.

One powerful way to be flexible is to volunteer at your dream institution. This option isn't available to everyone, but it's probably easier right after graduation—during the six-month grace period before the loans kick in—than any other time in your career. Doug DeFors, a 2007 graduate in collections management, found success in volunteering:

“Rather than not work in museums at all, I decided to disregard the advice of some experienced professionals and...work as an unpaid volunteer. It was (and is) my strategy to continue to...build my skills and experience even if not paid.... Last summer I accepted an opportunity to [volunteer] at SFMOMA.... Perhaps because of my enthusiasm in this project, I was eventually hired!”

Life is not perfect, and Doug was not able to keep his on-call job at SFMOMA when the economy began to tank, but, being a person of exceptional initiative and flexibility, he started his own business: “While I anxiously wait, I decided to start a collections consulting business called ‘Contract Registration Services’ ... and am attempting to develop some private collections work ... while continuing to do unpaid part-time registration work....”

Katie, the optimist described above, hopes to find work in a children's museum. She's working with kids at the local YMCA until things open up. She says, “I took the job at the YMCA because [when] I interviewed at the Children's Museum, [I realized that I needed] more experience working with kids. About a month

ago, I saw another job opening at the Children's Museum and applied.... They knew me from the previous interview, and I just had a phone interview today.”

3) Be patient.

Students who went straight through school without a lot of job experience should understand that the best jobs are still to come—*some years from now.* A soon-to-be grad writes, “Come May, I'll have my Master's. While I feel that this should be enough for me to get a job I want, I'm scared that I'm going to have to settle for an unpaid internship to get into a desirable department, or an underpaid job doing something I'd rather not. With my degree, I feel like... I should be able to find a job I love to go to every day.”

I agree—everyone should have a job that they love to go to every day. I've found that loving my job is largely dependent on my relationships with colleagues. I've also noticed that no matter how high you climb on the ladder, there are still onerous tasks. But if you're a new graduate with nothing but internships on your resume, you probably will need to take the less attractive jobs and work your way up. This is true in any profession.

Matt Isble, a current student who will complete his Master's in May, has already been hired as head of installation and design at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, California. How did he do it? By paying his dues before entering school. “I had the fortunate advantage of nearly ten years of exhibition design and installation experience in both museums and galleries,” he says. “The addition of a museum studies graduate degree with an emphasis in education has given me a very complete background that

Use your NAME network.

has finally paid off.... My advice [is to] work your way up and get to know the culture; it will benefit you greatly.”

4) Ask for help.

Ask your university’s placement office for help. If it’s a university-wide office (that is, not just for the museum grads), visit them often enough that they know who you are and what you can offer.

Look into professional job placement. “What finally really helped was working with a career counselor who helped me send out lots of informational interview requests and inquiry letters,” says Sean. “One project she recommended me for I was too busy for at the moment, but ended up leading to a staff position at a firm in Boston. I am part time there, but the freelancing makes up the other days, and I am really happy mixing it up like that.”

Use your NAME network. NAME *is the* professional organization for exhibition designers and developers in the U.S., and having a NAME membership on your resume tells prospective employers that you are serious about your career. The NAME listserv keeps members in touch regularly, and the NAME website ([www.http://name-aam.org](http://name-aam.org)) has job listings and many other resources. NAME also has a Facebook presence. You can join NAME via your AAM membership.

Take advantage of social networking. Post a professional profile on sites like ExhibitFiles or LinkedIn. Talk to your “friended friends” as well as your meatspace friends. Work it both ways: tells people you know about jobs that don’t suit you but might suit them. Be an active member of your community!

Finally, here’s a favor I can do for you. In researching this article I received this response from George Jacob of Design Craftsmen LLC (Midland, Michigan):

“Our firm has been hiring for the past 11 months and we are still on the upswing with numerous on-going museum projects globally. We are currently looking for:

- Creative writers
- Interpretive Planners
- Graphic Designers
- Scenic Supervisors
- Exhibit/ Prototyping Engineers
- Asst. Project Manager
- Project Manager
- Manager, Engineering Services
- Auto CAD Exhibit Detailers.”

Contact George at gjb@design-craftsmen.com. 