7 CAN’T-FAIL JOB-SEARCH TIPS

1. Start looking early. Don’t wait until your final semester to look for potential employers. “Job search” is a catchphrase for a reason—it usually takes hard work and ample time to match your capabilities with a design firm’s needs. Pay attention to design trends, flip through annuals, attend local conferences and other events, peruse design association Web sites, get involved in annual competitions and ask professors for job-seeking advice. Keep a running list of designers and studios you admire. The more you do before your senior year, the more honed your search will be.

2. Research, research some more, then target. In a tight job market, it’s critical to separate yourself from other candidates. If portfolio quality is similar, who’s going to have the edge? The person who’s taken pains to understand the employer’s goals, style, challenges, past projects, competitors, culture and more. Use the library and Internet to gather as much information as possible about your A-list job prospects. Make space in your cover letter for a paragraph that can be customized for each of the companies you’re targeting, and include ideas or statements to prove you’ve done your homework.

3. Expand your capabilities. It’s much harder to turn down a candidate who’s like a Swiss Army Knife of design. “The best tip for new graduates is to be as versatile as possible,” says Leigh Standley, a recent graduate of University of Kansas’ School of Design. “During your years in school, get your nose in everything.” While it’s fine to have a specialty, make yourself well-rounded. Consider taking courses in Web design, multimedia, advertising, writing and speech.

4. Dwell on what’s real. Employers prefer seeing projects created for actual clients more than mock ones created in classrooms. If you’ve completed an internship or freelance work, highlight those pieces first. Discuss what those clients needed, then explain the creative and production steps you took to fulfill those needs. Be sure to convey any challenges you solved.

5. List “no-budge” criteria. While it’s important to be flexible, you should consider—and write down—the job criteria you simply won’t budge on. Do you have geographic limitations? A working environment you wouldn’t be able to handle? “Getting a job is the obvious goal, but you shouldn’t go to a place you’re going to hate just to have one,” says Robert Williams, a designer at Howry Design Associates in San Francisco. Williams had a no-budge requirement—working at a studio that placed a premium on creativity, not just coin.

6. Show instead of tell. Interviewers are inundated with self-congratulatory statements: “I’ve always been a really creative person.” “I’m a goal-oriented person who works well in a team.” “I’m a person who likes a challenge.” Most employers hear, “Blah, blah, blah”—until you’re able to show instead of tell. Talk about specific times you were creative, goal-oriented or challenge-driven. If one of your strengths is Web design, include an online portfolio of your work. Redesign a few pages of your prospective employer’s Web site. Create a new logo for one of its clients. Hearing what you can do and seeing what you can do are completely different.

7. Check your arrogance at the door. While versatile skills are important in a tight job market, employers don’t expect young designers to be experts. They’re looking for go-getters, not gurus. Be confident, not cocky. “Because so much of our work is collaboration, we have no room for big egos,” says Jill Howry, principal of Howry Design Associates. During a job interview, don’t be shy about mentioning weaknesses. Show your self-motivation by eagerly explaining how you plan to improve as a designer.