

# SMART business *ideas*™

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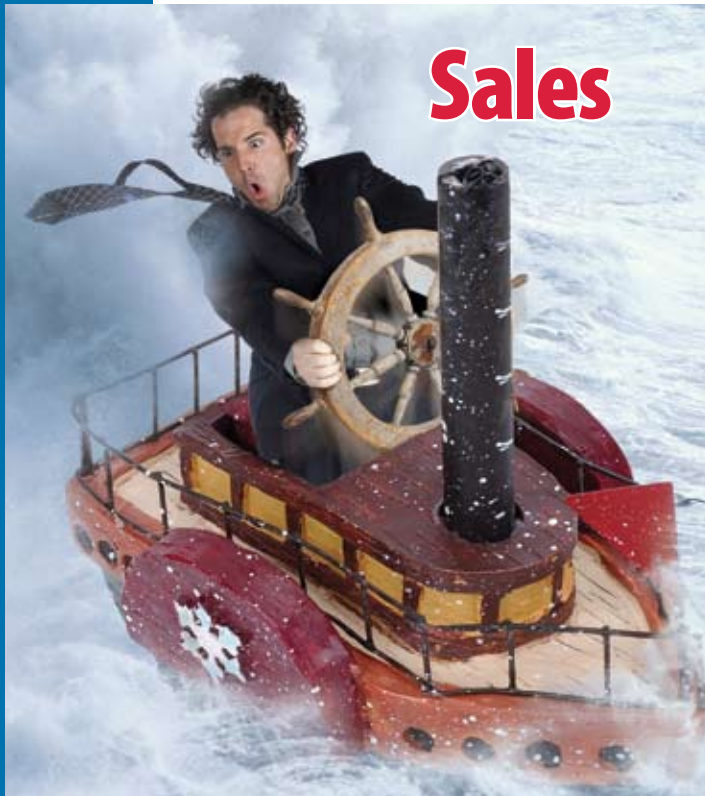
## "Sale-ing" in Turbulent Waters

- It's Not About the Money
- Market the Unseen

- Act Like a CEO, Not an Employee
- Turnover: It's Not All Bad

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## Perspectives: College Recruitment For Small Business

**I**t's a quintessential Catch-22 for many small-business owners: you need a variety of staff resources to take advantage of growth opportunities, but you can't afford the salaries and benefits to hire the employees you need to pursue this growth. If you've got mounting staff needs but insufficient funds to pay them competitive full-time wages, there are some quick and easy solutions, one of which is to hire talented college students whose quest for on-the-job experience and resume development outweighs their desire for a hefty paycheck.



Local businessmen Tom Moore and Brandon Labman have an especially unique perspective on the subject of employing college workers. Moore, a recent graduate of George Mason University in Fairfax, VA, with a degree in government, and Labman, a current student at GMU's business school, co-founded ROCS, which stands for "Responsible Outgoing College Students," a college-staffing firm based in Fair Lakes, VA, serving Northern Virginia and DC firms. ROCS places GMU students, recent graduates, and others into entry-level positions that relate to their major and experience, as either interns, part-time or full-time employees, or temporary-hires.

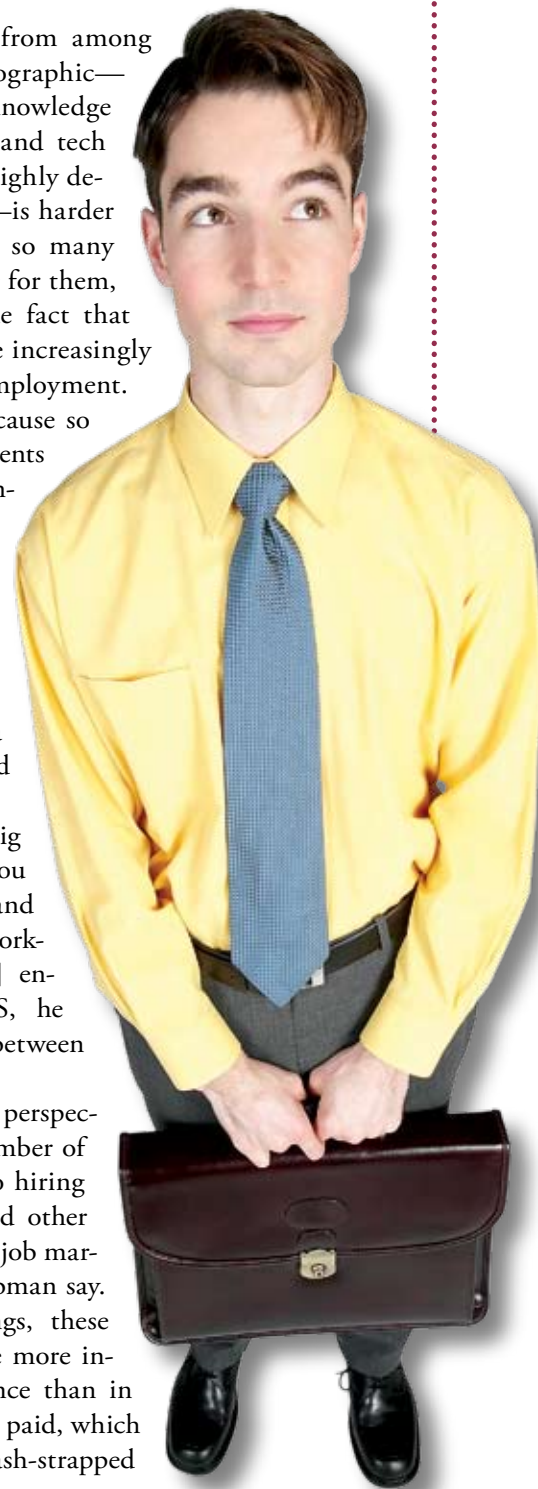
Moore and Labman, now both 23, were in their sophomore year at GMU when they recognized the need for a company like ROCS, especially in the DC metro area's highly competitive job market. Starting their business on a shoestring budget—they each chipped in \$300—but with lots of sweat equity, the two entrepreneurs officially opened ROCS' doors in 2004, after a year of market research. Since then, they've worked with more than 150 companies and 300+ students and graduates.

Filling positions within an organization with candidates who have the necessary requirements, skills, education, and salary demands is never easy. However, cul-

tivating prospects from among the college demographic—whose education, knowledge of cultural trends and tech savvy make them highly desirable candidates—is harder than ever, because so many recruiters are vying for them, not to mention the fact that college students are increasingly interested in self-employment.

However, it's because so many college students are interested in entrepreneurship that they're willing to join the ranks of a small company to get that experience, Moore says. "We call ROCS a kind of real-world degree," Labman adds. "There's a big gap between what you learn in school and things you learn working in a [business] environment." ROCS, he says, "is a bridge" between the two.

From a business' perspective, there are a number of practical benefits to hiring college students and other new entrants to the job market, Moore and Labman say. Among other things, these students tend to be more interested in experience than in what they are being paid, which is good news for a cash-strapped start-up. Moreover, temporary



workers and interns are perfect for project-based work, and such arrangements negate the difficulty associated with having to lay employees off if extra staffing becomes unnecessary.

Because they're interested in getting experience, these recruits are typically very conscientious and eager to learn and contribute ideas, Moore says. Interns looking for a resume-building experience also tend to be more diligent, ensuring that they'll be given a favorable reference. In short, Labman says, "They're hungry."

Another critical benefit to businesses, especially vis-à-vis temporary positions and internships, is that temp-to-permanent hiring affords them the chance to gauge whether there is a proper fit between their organizational culture and a given candidate before making the decision to hire someone full time.

It's a classic win-win, with the college workers in exchange getting what they want from a job, including a paycheck, benefits, and a foot in the door or, in the case of apprentices, a resume boost, hands-on experience, and a shot at being hired on as regular employees after graduating from college. The hires recruited by Moore and Labman are also exposed to and learn about entrepreneurship, receiving plenty of feedback about their performance along the way.

ROCS' business is thriving, thanks to campus-outreach activities, networking in such venues as the Central Fairfax Chamber of Commerce, advertising on new-media outlets like Facebook and MySpace, and referrals from satisfied clients. Moore and Labman also received the 2005 GSEA Student Entrepreneur Award, which they say has opened plenty of doors for them. They're expanding their office space and employ two part-time workers—GMU students, naturally—as well as student recruiters whose job it is to scour the campus for promising hires.

ROCS functions like other staffing agencies, charging a fee to the hiring firm and taking care of screening and testing of candidates, payroll, time-tracking, etc. Moore and Labman emphasize customer service and building trust both with the student body and with the firms seeking hires, meeting with both extensively in order to ensure a good match.

Moore's and Labman's long-range plan is to perfect their business model and take it to other universities, with an emphasis on urban centers, while their near-term focus is on growing their business vertically. "We're working on it 24/7," Labman says.

By Pamela Barnett

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