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Our Cannes-do attitude is paying off

Volunteering for work outside the day job increases your knowledge and can boost your career chances, writes Sorcha Corcoran

In a few weeks' time, 24-year-old Rachael Crawley will travel to the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity in France to represent Ireland in the global Young Marketers competition.

Crawley, a brand communications lead at Vodafone, dedicated time outside her working hours to enter the Irish Young Lions competition, run by the Institute of Advertising Practitioners in Ireland (IAP).

She teamed up with Paddy Carberry, sponsorship specialist at Vodafone, to devise a solution for the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland of how to encourage householders to reduce energy consumption.

"We thought it could be fun although we felt out of our comfort zone at first," says Crawley. "Once we got the ball rolling with the idea, we completed the project within three weeks during lunchtimes and free evenings."

The idea explored the potential use of broadband modems to inform users about the amount of energy their devices use via the My Vodafone app. It won the Young Marketers category, which was introduced this year as part of the Young Lions Ireland competition.

Crawley and Carberry will join seven other pairs of winners at the Cannes Lions festival in June. They will have 24 hours to answer a brief set by a non-profit organisation and demonstrate their strategic thinking and creative approach to solving marketing challenges.

Attended by 20,000 delegates from all over the world, Cannes Lions is an eight-day international festival of creative thinking, digital innovation, education and networking.

"Winning the Irish leg of the Young Marketers category has helped me to build a profile – so many people at a high level within Vodafone have congratulated me," says Crawley.

"At Cannes, I will get to meet peers from other countries and be exposed to different ways of thinking."

Dave Thomson, the winner in the media category of the Young Lions Ireland competition last year, was recently promoted from digital account manager to senior client manager at Starcom, a media buying and planning agency and part of the Core Media Group.

The "Buy one for Peter" campaign involved encouraging a target market to donate to the Peter McVerry trust,

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Lion's share: from left, Shane Doyle of Core Media, Carberry, Crawley and Aidan Greene, deputy chief executive at Core Media and president of the IAPI

which helps homeless people, when buying coffee.

Competing at Cannes tested Thomson's skills and helped him to take a fresh approach to his work, he says. The contribution it made to the agency was recognised by management in his yearly performance review and, he feels, played a part in his promotion.

"The best thing about Cannes was the sense of being surrounded by best-in-class thinking and how seriously the festival is taken globally," he says.

"What I learnt there has helped us as an agency to place a greater emphasis on creativity and creative thinking when addressing problems. This allows us to think more boldly when we look at client

briefs and come up with solutions that will work better for them."

Thomson gained direct exposure to top management. It also provided him with intensive training on how to answer a brief.

"The experience gave me confidence in turning work around and presenting in front of people," he says.

Shane Doyle, group strategy director at Core Media Ireland, believes extra-curricular activity is crucial for career development, particularly in the advertising and communications sector.

He served as a voluntary council member for the Marketing Society of Ireland for three years.

"I felt it was important to get involved

“What I learnt has helped us as an agency to place a greater emphasis on creativity when addressing issues

in the industry and give back a little bit," he says.

"There is a suggestion with extra-curricular activity that it is all about giving back – either to the industry you're in or to other groups in wider society," he says. "I think competitions such as Young Lions Ireland err more on the side of career development. Giving back becomes more important as careers progress."

Carmel Murphy, a board member of Volunteer Ireland (VI), started as a trainee human resources manager in Dunnes Stores in 1995. She worked her way up to becoming group employee-relations manager and decided to take a year out and travel in 2005. After joining

Arnotts as HR manager in 2006, she became involved with a small charity called Health Action Overseas (HAO), which supports young people in Romania with disabilities so that they can live independently.

"My own career benefited a lot from being on the board of HAO as well as the non-executive role I have with VI," she says.

"As a non-executive board member, you act in an advisory capacity and need to have an umbrella view of how the entity is being run. I brought that different perspective to my day job. It helped me to stand back and constructively challenge the business I was working for."

Murphy believes her volunteering experience helped her to get promoted to HR director at Arnotts in 2007.

"I had an insight into the role and responsibilities of a member of a senior leadership team and this gave me exposure to areas such as corporate governance," she says.

"I learnt that the challenges that different types of organisations face are not unique. For me volunteering was originally about giving something back but it turns out that I learnt more than I have given."

Murphy decided to take redundancy from her role as HR director at Arnotts in November and is looking at her options after spending two months in Central and South America.

Anna Lee, chairwoman of VI, retired as chief executive of South Dublin County Partnership three years ago. She has chaired the grants committee for the Community Foundation for Ireland for many years and sat on advisory committees for Focus Ireland and the Broadcast Authority of Ireland.

"The experience I got as chief executive has been valuable in other sectors," she says. "When I was working I would spend the equivalent of a day and a half a month volunteering, where it is now more like a day a week."

Lee believes that volunteer work matters more now on a CV than it used to. "It is helpful in securing work, especially where it has involved a specific skill-set that is related to the role," she says.

"People can use volunteering as a testing ground, to see if they really want to work in a particular area. It is all about testing skills and competencies in a different place outside of the day job."