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Bernhart Associates' Jerry Bernhart on the Direct Marketing Job Market

January 23, 2008

By Kate DeBevois, senior associate editor, *Target Marketing*

With the pendulum beginning to shift from a candidate-driven job market to an employer-driven market, those companies not locked in a hiring freeze are carefully selecting from the brimming talent pool, according to Jerry Bernhart, president of Owatonna, Minn.-based Bernhart Associates Executive Search. The firm's January 7, 2008 employment survey, a random survey of 79 companies, predicts more hiring freezes and increased layoffs this quarter. According to the report, 58 percent of companies surveyed said they plan to add to staff during the first quarter of 2008, down 2 percent from the previous survey (conducted last October).

Not only are companies increasing layoffs and putting a hold on hiring, 12 percent also indicated they plan to reduce payroll, up from 9 percent last quarter. "All of our hiring indicators are turning more negative," says Bernhart. "This weakness comes as no surprise, given the recent news of layoffs and the current overall economic climate."

Here, he details the story behind the hiring freeze and highlights tips on how to take advantage of the job market shift.

Target Marketing: What are the top factors contributing to the direct marketing job market slump?

Jerry Bernhart Overall economic weakness. There are a lot of factors working against direct marketers: last year's postal increase, the housing slump, the sub-prime mess, high gas prices [and] the plunging stock market. All of this impacts business, and that, in turn, impacts hiring. Venture capitalists are seeing fewer deals that make financial sense right now.

TM: What is causing the hiring freeze, and can you project what needs to happen for employers to lift the ban?

JB: As business conditions have deteriorated, hiring freezes are being imposed to hold the line on labor costs. Employers are feeling uncertain about the future. In our survey, we not only ask if a company has imposed a hiring freeze, we also ask when it expects to lift it. Most said they were unsure when they would lift it. That is, they couldn't give us a definite end-date. That is very indicative of the uncertainty that is out there right now.

TM: What factors are shifting the job market from candidate-driven to employer-driven?

JB: It's getting easier for marketers to find qualified talent. That's because there are more people looking, either because they lost their jobs or they're getting nervous about the stability of their current positions.

TM: What percentage of recent graduates are entering the direct marketing field?

JB: I'm not seeing as many young people get into the industry as I did 15 or 20 years ago. Perhaps that's partly because they are more attracted to areas like high-tech, where they see opportunities that, to them, are more exciting and have strong long-term prospects.

TM: Do you think the Direct Marketing Association education program efforts will begin to help offset this new talent deficit?

JB: I hope so! Clearly, there needs to be a pipeline of new talent, because companies simply aren't devoting resources to training and developing talent like they used to in this industry.

TM: As more seasoned job seekers come onto the market, what are three tips for direct marketing firms working to hire talent?

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