



What to Look For in Database Marketing Candidates

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At a recent database marketing conference, noted database marketing consultant Volkan Tekeli and I were sharing observations about the increasingly tight labor market for database marketers, especially those who bridge marketing and technology.

Both Volkan and I were quick to agree that there's never been a time when qualified candidates have been in such short supply. And when companies find good database marketers, they have trouble keeping them. There are many reasons why this labor gap is widening:

* The field itself is fairly new. Database marketing did not really come into its own until the second half of the 1980's. Database marketing relies on a robust, quality-controlled database containing historical information, straightforward user access, rapid turnaround, statistical modeling and scoring capabilities. This was beyond the capabilities of many organizations until recently, so the actual number of people with deep experience has been limited by technological realities.

* There has not been an across-the-board definition of database marketing responsibilities. Expectations of what database marketers should do can differ from organization to organization, industry to industry, business unit to business unit. This can lead to a disconnect between expected and actual skill sets.

* Other terms have come into vogue, which describe remarkably similar processes: strategic direct marketing, decision support, relationship marketing, data-driven marketing, one-to-one marketing, data mining and right time marketing are but a few of the terms introduced. The plethora of job titles and department names built around these terms have made it difficult for prospective employers to hone in on those candidates who meet specific job requirements.

* The sheer speed of technological innovation has surpassed the ability of practitioners to keep abreast. Firms with the fixed idea of looking for applicants with detailed knowledge of specific software packages, database structures, languages and quantitative techniques

are often disappointed. The available pool of applicants often does not match their criteria.

* Database marketing -- and database marketer -- expectations have rapidly evolved over a short time period. Some of the staff hired in the past may no longer have the skills, training, business knowledge or sophistication to take full advantage of new processes, techniques and languages.

* Candidates who seem to have perfect resumes on paper often come up short in person. That is, while the technical and/or marketing specs are met, the one-on-one interview falls short. Common complaints include lack of focus, over-specialization, lack of strategic vision, insufficient verbal skills, little intuition and no demonstrated leadership skills.

* Finally, the term database marketing is itself an oxymoron of sorts. This is because people tend to skew with respect to their career preferences. Those interested in database are generally not interested in marketing; similarly, those interested in marketing tend not to be interested in database. Yet the field of database marketing calls for interest and expertise in both database and marketing.

Moving beyond standard hiring criteria of education and related experience, hiring managers should look for four key competencies: Communication skills, logic skills, balancing skills and sense of humor. Let's look at each one of these in more detail.

Communication skills. Database marketers act as liaisons between marketing and systems. They work directly with marketers to discuss, advise, brainstorm, provide reporting, present findings, develop requirements and shape campaigns. Similarly, they work with Information Technology to translate specs, access systems, conduct analysis, pull lists, do acceptance testing and map business processes. This takes the ability to translate detailed business requirements into systems lingo and the ability to translate complicated systems concepts into simple English. This also requires the ability to work with people at all organizational levels.

Logic skills. Database marketers access systems to make business decisions. Systems require a modicum of Boolean logic to run queries. Thus, database marketers must be able to logic their way through a system. Whether employing user-friendly software packages or sophisticated computer languages, the ability to use systems tools to reason through a query is paramount to a database marketer's success. Such experience cannot be faked or delegated or learned from a book or manual; it must have been lived.

Balancing skills. Database marketers must constantly juggle between working directly with clients and using systems to solve business problems. On the one hand, a database marketer must understand the marketer's business needs and drivers, assess issues surrounding decision-making, factor in organizational impact, discuss available options and deal with other considerations that can only be derived from working directly with the marketing client. On the other hand, the database marketer must spend time on the information system to bring to the table business solutions. The ability to leverage and act upon information defines a database marketer's work.

Sense of humor. A sense of humor tends to humanize database marketers to their clients as well as help database marketers cope with the inevitable unpredictability of random events outside of their control. A sense of humor binds database marketers closer to their clients and instills crisis management skills. This in no way implies a lack of seriousness or responsibility on a database marketer's part. It's simply important that the database marketer be perceived as approachable by marketers and IT, and a sense of humor can do much to ease that perception.

Jerry Bernhart is president of Bernhart Associates, Owatonna, MN, and has recently launched directmarketingcareers.com, a career Web site exclusively for direct marketers.