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Bernhart: No Rebound In DM Employment Until 2010

Apr 21, 2009 5:29 PM, By Richard H. Levey

Don't look for the direct marketing employment landscape to pick up much before 2010, Jerry Bernhart told Direct Newsline. Only 16% of companies surveyed plan to add staff during the current second quarter – the lowest percentage since the survey began in 2001.

Bernhart is principal of Bernhart Associates Executive Search, LLC, which conducts the quarterly survey. The most recent results mark the eighth quarter in a row in which DM hiring has shrunk.

The news isn't all bad – just mostly. The 4% drop in hiring plans marketers reported was the smallest quarter-to-quarter decline for that indicator in a year, while planned layoffs showed an unexpected reversal. According to the Bernhart survey, 13% of respondents are planning to reduce headcount during the current second quarter, down from 21% reported last quarter.

And only 30% report being under a hiring freeze, compared with 48% last quarter. But when asked when they plan to lift their freezes, the majority were unable to give a date. Among those that did, Bernhart said most indicated another 6 to 9 months out.

Perhaps the best news came from the agency side. Thirty percent of agencies are planning new hires this quarter.

"Not only are agencies planning to do more hiring than their marketing and supplier counterparts, they're also expecting fewer layoffs," Bernhart said in a statement accompanying the survey results. "Overall, hiring levels are still falling but the worst of the job losses may be over," he continued.

Throughout the DM community, the positions in greatest demand this quarter include sales, which topped the list, followed by analysts, web developers, account directors/managers and marketers.

"Companies are calling asking if I have available talent in sales and analytics," Bernhart told Direct Newsline. "While companies are cutting their sales staff, they are doing selective hiring, looking for expertise in a specific vertical, or geography. Or maybe it is an opportunity to replace underperforming sales reps with more experienced ones that have better contacts. I've had a few calls from companies that are actively looking to upgrade their sales staff."

That sounds somewhat promising. So why does Bernhart feel true recovery is a year away at the earliest? "I've conducted the survey for eight years," he told Direct Newsline. "During the last downturn, which was 2001-2002, the job picture for DMers did not begin to show steady improvement until early 2004. The end of 2003 was when we started to see things pick up.

"This recession is more severe," he continued. "When talking about layoffs, you have to remember that only the percentage of companies anticipating them has gone down. People are still talking about layoffs and hiring freezes. The big question – do you intend to add staff – is down again this quarter. It dropped by 10 percentage points during the first quarter, and four percentage points during the second quarter. Until that stabilizes there will be no recovery. And we are not there yet."

Despite the abundance of direct marketing job seekers on the market, companies are having challenges filling some of their open positions. According to the survey, 61% of those responding said they were experiencing either a "somewhat difficult time" or a "very difficult time" filling available openings. The remainder said they were having little or no difficulty.

The latest survey also reveals some new insights into how direct marketing executives

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